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Macron Receives Kenya's Kenyatta as France Looks to Expand into Anglophone East Africa  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta traveled to Paris earlier this week to seal the deal on a new highway, the latest of several joint economic projects. However, France isn't just talking to Kenya, it's expanding its influence across East Africa, an area outside its traditional sphere of influence on the continent.

Kenyatta and French President Emmanuel Macron are set to finalize plans for construction of a 233-kilometer four-lane highway from the Kenyan capital of Nairobi to Mau Summit, greatly alleviating traffic congestion along one of the country's primary travel arteries. The public-private partnership will see Kenya National Highways Authority partner with a French consortium of Vinci Highways SAS, Meridian Infrastructure Africa Fund, and Vinci Concessions SAS to build, operate, and maintain the highway for the next 30 years for 160 billion Kenyan shillings (\$1.48 billion), according to [Nairobi daily The Star](#). It will be a toll road.

The project will also include widening the existing road along that route. Some of Vinci's other work includes the [A7-2 Motorway](#) in Germany and the [M11 Neva Highway](#) in Russia.

Kenyatta and Macron also discussed helping Kenya to manufacture vaccines locally, something Nairobi became more interested in after supplies of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccines from India were [interrupted in May](#), as COVID-19 cases exploded in that country. While no specifics of their talks were given, if Kenya did begin manufacturing vaccines it would become one of just a handful of countries in Africa to do so, most of which have remained dependent on the [short-supplied COVAX](#) program managed by the World Health Organization and fueled by donations from richer nations. Others include Egypt, Morocco, and South Africa.

The two heads of state also planned a summit for July 28 and 29, at which they will be joined by UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson to set up a \$5 billion education investment for 175 million children in low-income countries, [according to The Standard](#), a Kenyan daily paper.

However, the highway isn't the only economic project France is building in Kenya. In October, when Macron and Kenyatta hammered out much of the details on the highway project, they also discussed construction of a commuter rail line from the Nairobi central business district to Jomo Kenyatta International Airport and a 400kV electrical transmission line stretching 45 kilometers from Menengai to Rongai, [Kenya's Business Daily](#) reported at the time.

Paris' interest in Kenya is new: Macron's 2019 trip there was the first by a French head of state since Kenya won independence from the United Kingdom in 1963, [during which](#) he secured \$2.27 billion worth of contracts for French companies.

Macron Pens Deals Across East Africa

However, French interest has been expanding across East Africa, an area outside its traditional sphere of influence. Kenya, as well as Uganda and Tanzania, were British colonies, not French

ones, and France has tended to focus on the vast swath of western and central African nations over which it once ruled.

France's [exports to Kenya](#) have increased in recent years, from \$200 million in 2017 to \$222 million in 2019, which accounted for just 1.18% of Kenyan imports that year. China, by comparison, accounted for 23.9% of Kenyan imports in 2019, about \$4.4 billion. That same year, France bought \$89.9 million in goods from Kenya, about 1.44% of its total exports, the largest recipient of which was neighboring Uganda.

In Uganda and Tanzania, French oil giant Total scooped up a stake in the East African Crude Oil pipeline (EACOP) from Irish gas company Tullow in 2020. The 1,445-kilometer pipeline, being built in cooperation with China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC), will extend from Hoima in western Uganda's oil fields south around Lake Victoria before turning east to the Tanzanian port of Tanga.

EACOP was originally planned to go through Kenya, but Total changed the route over fears it would be vulnerable to attack by Al-Shabaab, a terrorist group in neighboring Somalia that mounted a daring cross-border attack into Kenya in early 2020. Once completed, it will be the world's longest heated oil pipeline.

In May, [Macron pressed](#) the Museveni government on speeding up the construction timeline on the project just weeks after Tanzania and Uganda finalized the deal, [saying it is a](#) "major opportunity to intensify trade between our two countries and to further expand our cooperation." The project is just one of several Total has poured big money into in recent years, including a large [concession in Mozambique](#) worth \$20 billion.

In 2019, Alfred Onek, a spokesperson for the French embassy in Kampala, boasted that investments by Total and other French firms were improving employment in Uganda and that relations were "quite warm" as a result. He noted French-Ugandan military training was expanding, as well.

The Tanzanian government [penned a deal](#) with the French Development Agency (AFD) earlier this month to build a 150-megawatt solar power plant in Kishapu in southern Tanzania for \$154 million. Last year, Tanzania and the AFD [signed \\$272 million](#) in development deals, including rural electrification projects, a power connection with Zambia, and water extensions to the suburbs of Mwanza, Tanzania's chief port city on Lake Victoria.

Additionally, in former-Belgian colony Rwanda, Macron has tried to "reset" relations. The [French president traveled](#) there last month to admit the "magnitude of our responsibilities" for the 1994 genocide of up to 800,000 Tutsis by the ruling Hutu government. However, he stopped short of admitting French forces who protected Hutu leaders from Tutsi attacks during the height of the killing had been an "accomplice" to the massacre. [A March report](#) by a fact-finding commission set up by Macron found France bears "overwhelming responsibilities" for allowing the genocide to take place.

However, during that same trip, Macron and Rwandan President [Paul Kagame signed](#) a \$1.7 million deal to facilitate sports talent and a \$71 million deal to sell Rwanda COVID-19 vaccines.

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## Prosecutor Who's Sued Trump 'More Than 100 Times' Set to Become Manhattan's New District Attorney

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Alvin Bragg, a Democratic candidate for Manhattan District Attorney, is all but guaranteed a win in the Friday primary election after his close rival suddenly withdrew. Just days ago, the office brought charges against the Trump Organization and its chief financial officer, Allen Weisselberg.

Earlier on Friday, candidate Tali Farhadian Weinstein announced her defeat in the race after absentee ballots she had counted on to put her ahead of Bragg failed to do so. In the run up to the vote, Weinstein trailed Bragg by just 3%, according to the [New York Times](#).

Bragg is a career prosecutor and former chief deputy New York State attorney general, a position in which he has [boasted he sued](#) the presidential administration of Donald Trump "more than a hundred times."

Democrats tend to dominate New York politics, leaving little doubt Bragg will triumph over Republican contender Thomas Kenniff in the November vote.

Earlier this week, the Manhattan District Attorney's Office filed yet another suit against Trump, this time against the Trump Organization, a massive conglomerate of roughly 500 companies owned by Donald Trump, half of which bear his name. He handed off leadership of the company to his children when he became US President in 2017, but questions about his relationship to the corporation and its ties to his administration plagued his four-year presidency, which ended in January 2021.

The [July 1 indictment](#) accuses the Trump Organization of a "sweeping and audacious tax evasion scheme" for 15 years dating back to 2005. It brings 15 counts against CFO Weisselberg, including fraud, grand larceny, falsification of business records and conspiracy. Because of the incredible density of wealthy people and corporate headquarters in Manhattan, the city's DA is always someone of immense power. However, the office only handles alleged violations of New York state law; the US Attorney for the Southern District of New York presses cases against alleged breakers of federal law.

"We're also talking about the gun-trafficking issues, the scope of the entire system and the collateral consequences," Bragg told the NYT. "It's all a profound responsibility."

He is a native of Harlem and a graduate of Howard Law School in Washington, DC, where he also attended undergrad. Bragg would be the first black man to hold the position, meaning he would preside over a district that prosecutes more black people than any other racial group. He has pledged to end racial disparities in the system.

"We're going to demand and deliver on both safety and fairness," he said earlier this week, according to the [Wall Street Journal](#).

He has pledged to form new units to hold police accountable, that he will review past convictions, and that he will decouple convictions as a measure of success. To counterbalance this, he says he will focus more energy on prosecuting white-collar crime.

"The need for reform in our office's policies and practices is urgent," [a document outlining](#) his plans states. "It is critical that the changes described in this memorandum take effect immediately."

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Video: US National Weather Service Confirms Two Tornadoes Struck Downtown Washington, DC, Thursday  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

A day after heavy thunderstorms swept across the Washington, DC, region, the US National Weather Service has confirmed that the last and most destructive storm contained two tornadoes, one of which passed close to the White House.

According to the federal [meteorological service](#), an F1-strength tornado with 90 mile-per-hour winds formed in Arlington County, Virginia, at roughly 9 pm on Thursday evening and passed over the town of Rosslyn and the Potomac River before dissipating on the National Mall, a large park at the center of Washington, DC. Moments earlier, an emergency alert for a tornado warning sounded off on residents' phones, alerting them to immediately take cover.

The tornado was 125 yards wide (114 meters) and its 4.4-mile-long path takes it between the Washington Monument and the White House. Tornadoes' power is rated F0 to F5 on a scale developed by meteorologist Ted Fujita, reflecting increasing wind speed.

The same storm produced a second tornado, rated slightly weaker at F0-strength with winds of 80 miles per hour, that touched down in eastern Washington, DC, a few minutes later. That tornado was 75 yards (68.5 meters) wide and cut a path about three-quarters of a mile long through mostly residential neighborhoods.

Videos captured the storm as it swept into the city. In the footage, a low cloud can be seen ahead of the main storm. That is the wall cloud, showing where the powerful updraft feeding the tornado is located, but it isn't the tornado itself, which is shrouded in the dense rain that sweeps in behind it.

According to [the Washington Post](#), a powerful bow-shaped storm front swept through the capitol region on Thursday night, and at the center of it a massive supercell storm that made a bulls-eye for downtown Washington.

A video of radar readouts as the storm passed over the region compiled by AccuWeather senior editor Jesse Farrell shows an axis of rotation passing through Rosslyn, Virginia, into Washington, DC, and passing over the area immediately proximate to the White House grounds before exiting the city to the east. The rotation lines up precisely with the NWS' reports in Virginia and DC of tornado damage, as well as a sharp change in wind direction just as the tornado is supposed to have touched down in the H Street neighborhood north of the US Capitol.

Moreover, a radar image of rain intensity shows the feared number-six-shaped "hook echo," the meteorologist's telltale sign of tornadic activity.

Video captured by DC residents shows the storm's fury, which brought powerful winds and drenching rain even a far distance away from the tornado itself.

The storm put a sudden end to the baseball game underway at Nationals Park, where the storm put an end to the Nationals' misery in the 5th inning as they lost to the Los Angeles Dodgers 6-2.



The storms knocked out power for thousands in the region and snapped trees across the city, including some of the huge mature trees that dominate the National Mall. Tornadoes in DC are rare but not unknown. Two weak tornadoes spawned from an [April 2017 storm](#), one of which caused damage at the Tidal Basin. Another far more powerful storm destroyed much of the town of La Plata, Maryland, in 2002, which rated F4 on the Fujita scale.

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Afghanistan's Reconciliation Chief Abdullah Warns Taliban Talks Making 'Very Little Progress' by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

As the final withdrawal date for US forces in Afghanistan grows close, all eyes are on the turbulent relationship between the Taliban and the government in Kabul. Abdullah Abdullah, head of the Afghan government's High Council for National Reconciliation, recently said the peace talks have made little headway - but the Taliban offensive has.

The reconciliation chief, who lost the 2019 presidential race to incumbent Ashraf Ghani, [told CNN](#) on Friday that peace talks with the Taliban had made "very little headway" and were proceeding at a "very slow pace."

While the US negotiated a peace deal with the Taliban in February 2020, allowing US forces to leave the country as the Taliban forswore terrorist tactics, no such deal was reached with the Kabul government, which the Taliban regards as a US puppet regime lacking in legitimacy. The Taliban ruled the country from 1996 until 2001, when a US invasion ended their brutal Islamist regime.

Although Taliban-Kabul talks began, they have been slow-going, and amid the US withdrawal, many have raised fears the Afghan government [may quickly crumble](#) against the insurgent force the US and its allies couldn't defeat after nearly 20 years of war.

[Speaking to reporters](#) in Washington, DC, following meetings with US President Joe Biden and other top US officials last week, Ghani said that "the false narrative of abandonment is just false."

However, Abdullah, who accompanied Ghani to the US, told CNN that "had it been our choice ... we would have thought differently."

However, the two men struck a tone on the issue of a potential Taliban victory.

"It will not happen," Abdullah said. "The Taliban have failed. They promised that they will de-link with al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups. We don't have many signs of that. So that's the danger for us, as well as for the region."

"Too much has been gained for things to go back to the way they were before October 2001," he added. "There might be temporary setbacks here and there, which is what we are witnessing but part of those gains are irreversible."

Ghani said last week that regional nations should "bet" on his government in Kabul, which will continue to receive US support for its civil and military budgets.

However, CNN also reported Friday that a video statement by Taliban political office spokesperson Mohammad Naeem called into doubt Abdullah's framing, saying it was the Kabul government that had blocked the talks from proceeding.

"Our intention was to make some progress, but the opposite side was not interested in the peace talks," Naeem said, noting Kabul's negotiating team in Doha, Qatar, had been incomplete. He attributed that to some being "physically present in the battlefield" and "busy in war."

Last week, Deborah Lyons, the UN's special envoy on Afghanistan, [said that 50](#) of Afghanistan's 370 districts had fallen to Taliban militants since May.

The Taliban have made substantial gains since launching a new offensive in May, when the original deadline for the US withdrawal had passed. However, the Afghan armed forces have also seen a new wave of [volunteers joining up](#), since US forces are no longer there to protect them.

At the UN Security Council in New York last week, UN special envoy to Afghanistan Deborah Lyons revealed that more than 50 of Afghanistan's 370 districts had been captured by the Taliban since May 1.

"Those districts that have been taken surround provincial capitals, suggesting that the Taliban are positioning themselves to try and take these capitals once foreign forces are fully withdrawn," she warned.

All but a [650-strong security force](#) for the US embassy and Kabul airport were due to be out of the country by July 4, but [Biden said on Friday](#) that the US would miss that goal, but was still on track to be out by the end of August. The final date set unilaterally by Biden is September 11, 2021 - the 20-year anniversary of the terrorist attacks in New York, Virginia and Pennsylvania by al-Qaeda that precipitated the US invasion in October 2001.

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Sirens Heard From US Embassy in Baghdad Were Reportedly 'False Alarm' Triggered by Drone by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The Green Zone was established as a fortified, high-security area in central Baghdad during the US occupation war of the 2000s. While the area has since been opened to normal traffic, several powerful defense systems continue to defend it, including a C-RAM system capable of shooting down rockets, artillery shells and mortar shells at close range.

A video posted on social media purported to show sirens wailing in the Green Zone in central Baghdad, Iraq, early on Friday morning. The zone houses the US embassy and other facilities. Sabereen News, which is associated with Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) paramilitary corps, announced the report on its Telegram channel. No cause for the alarm was given. Sabereen later reported that the siren was a "false alarm" triggered by a drone, possibly one launched from an event inside the embassy grounds.



The incident comes days after a US base in eastern Syria was [hit by several rockets](#) fired by an unknown actor, which in turn followed US airstrikes in Syria and Iraq that were allegedly made against Iraqi militias who had targeted US troops. However, Kata'ib Hezbollah and Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, the two militias the US allegedly targeted, [has claimed they have](#) no ammunition storage facilities in the areas the US struck. [Baghdad condemned](#) the US attack as "a flagrant violation of Iraq's sovereignty and national security."

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Somalia Unveils Indirect Election Plan to Defuse Crisis, Aims for October Presidential Vote by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Somalia's military, long structured along clan lines, has struggled to integrate its forces and unite them around a national identity, allowing units to fracture along the lines of regional disagreements and threatening a return to civil war.

The Somali government has announced a timetable for presidential elections to be held, signalling that a months-long political crisis could soon be at an end. However, not all tensions between the nation's powerful states have yet been resolved, including the central debate over just how the vote should be structured.

The office of Somali Prime Minister Mohamed Hussein Roble on Tuesday laid out the timetable for the elections, which will be indirect. First, elections to the Senate, parliament's upper house, will be held on July 25, then elections to the House of the People, the lower house, will come between August 10 and September 10; finally, the newly elected legislature will vote on October 10 on who the next president will be.

Further, the votes for the 275 representatives in the House of the People will be cast not by popular vote, but by 101 special delegates chosen by clan elders. Senate candidates are nominated by presidents of Somalia's five states, who are then endorsed by local legislatures. There are 54 seats in the Senate.

However, there will be double the number of polling locations and double the number of delegates as in the last elections in 2017, and the registration cost for women will be lower, which officials hope will boost female electoral participation.

"I commend the leaders of the council and hope the election will be a peaceful and transparent one, based on the agreed-upon schedule and processes," Roble said, [according to AFP](#).

**Crisis Over Alleged Power Grab**

The elections were originally supposed to be held in December 2020, following an agreement hammered out in September of that year in which all parties broadly agreed on indirect elections that would respect the power of the country's traditional tribal elders. However, with many of the finer but necessary details yet to be hammered out, the vote was postponed indefinitely and the term of President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, better known as "Farmaajo," was extended past its February 2021 expiration.

Farmaajo, who favored a one-person-one-vote scheme not used since 1969, briefly received support from the House of the People, parliament's lower house, for a two-year extension of his

term in order to solidify the election structure. However, his [support quickly crumbled](#) as elements of the army loyal to those states who wanted an indirect system mutinied and took up positions in the capital. As the sound of firefights rang out, thousands fearing a return to civil war fled the city. Many critics derided Farmaajo's move as a power grab and an attempted return to dictatorship.

By late April, Farmaajo [had walked back](#) his term extension, but the opposition demanded election protocols be decided upon within 60 days.

The agreement almost didn't happen: Ali Gudlawe, president of Hirshabelle state and a close ally of Farmaajo, reportedly boycotted the second of the two-day consultations in Mogadishu. According to [Garowe Online](#), the National Consultative Forum reached its final agreement without him.

Hirshabelle was one of three states that backed Farmaajo's push for a one-person-one-vote election, alongside Galmudug and South-West.

#### US Troops Could Soon Return

Somalia is a land rich in natural resources, including petroleum, exploration of which was halted for many years as civil war raged in the 1990s and 2000s, but has resumed in recent years.

Under Farmaajo, Mogadishu has grown close to the United States, which has waged an undeclared war against the Al-Qaeda-connected militia group Al-Shabaab.

Former US President Donald Trump pulled roughly 700 US troops out of Somalia in December 2020, but as [Sputnik has reported](#), clandestine operations have continued and US forces have "commuted" to work in Somalia from their new bases in Djibouti or Kenya. The situation reportedly has the Biden administration reconsidering Trump's decision.

"I've been communicating back and forth with my civilian leaders in the Department of Defense, the Secretary of Defense, giving him options," US Army Gen. Stephen Townsend, the commander of US Africa Command, [said on Tuesday](#) at the European Union Defense Washington Forum. "And I think we'll keep those options right where they should be, in private communications with the Secretary Defense, so our civilian leaders have the opportunity to make their decisions."

"There's really no denying that our ... fairly sudden repositioning out of Somalia earlier this year has introduced new layers of risk and complexity to our mission there," Townsend said. "So, what we're trying to do is manage that risk and complexity as we still try to help our African partners with their security challenges."

"I would say, though, that there's really no denying our repositioning - fairly sudden repositioning - out of Somalia earlier this year has introduced new layers of risk and complexity to our mission there," he added. "Right now, we're commuting back and forth to work."

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US Neocons Found 'Turkish Democracy Project' as Ankara's Favor in Washington Wanes  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)



A new think tank founded by a group of US neoconservative figures aims to turn Turkey back into a "democracy" and a "reliably ally" of the United States once more. Although the Turkish Democracy Project" stops short of calling for regime change, its staff is littered with men whose careers have been built on it.

"For the better part of the last century, Turkey was a reliable ally and a model in the region of liberal ideals and cultural freedom," the Turkish Democracy Project (TDP) [says on its website](#).

"But in recent years, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has dramatically altered Turkey's position in the international community and its status as a free and liberal democracy."

The group, whose website went active on June 23, describes itself as "a nonprofit, non-partisan, international policy organization" which "opposes its destabilizing behavior, supports genuine democratic reform, and holds the forces of corruption and oppression within Turkey to account." Why this is the task of a bunch of American former diplomats and academics is never stated.

#### US-Turkish Relations Slowly Implode

Turkey joined the NATO alliance in 1952, meaning the US is pledged to defend the country if it comes under attack, and Turkey has long been a key partner for the US in the region, including housing a large air force base at Incirlik that held nuclear weapons. However, the government of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has butted heads with US policymakers several times in recent years, helping to create a rift between the allies.

In April, sanctions came into [force against Ankara](#) for its purchasing of S-400 air defense systems from Russia, which the US said was dangerous because it could expose weaknesses in the F-35 stealth aircraft that Turkey was also preparing to field. Turkey was also kicked out of the F-35 program in the affair.

In Syria and Iraq, Turkey has also largely stood contrary to US policies, particularly in its war [against Kurdish militias](#), which Ankara calls terrorist groups but which are also allied with the United States and serving an important role in denying Syrian President Bashar al-Assad control of the eastern, oil-rich third of the country. Turkey has also supported restoration of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran, confronted US allies Greece, Cyprus and Israel over gas exploration rights in the Mediterranean, and supported the Hamas government in Gaza.

Erdogan has also intervened in the Libyan civil war on the side of Presidential Council chairman Faez al-Serraj, while the [US tacitly supports](#) General Khalifa Haftar, the rebellious army chief who has challenged Serraj's flimsy UN-backed government in Tripoli from the eastern stronghold of Tobruk.

Aside from the sanctions, another important mark of the unraveling US-Turkey relationship was [the April recognition](#) by the Biden administration of the 1916 genocide of Armenians by the Ottoman Empire, to which Turkey is the legal successor state.

The situation brings to mind many former US allies who have been discarded after they no longer proved useful to US foreign policy, such as longtime Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. After the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, Hussein launched an invasion of Iran and the US threw its weight behind supporting his war effort - even as its [secretly funneled arms](#) to Tehran and despite Iraq already being a Soviet client. However, when the war was over and Hussein invaded Kuwait, to which it was deeply indebted, and the Soviet dissolved shortly thereafter, Hussein's government became an obstacle to US policy in the region and Washington began planning his overthrow, which came in 2003.



That agenda [was largely set](#) by a group of neoconservatives, who, in 1997, founded the Project for a New American Century. This group laid out plans for accelerating Republican interventionist politics to destroy a host of former Soviet client states and ensure the US remained unchallenged around the globe.

#### Neocons And Interventionists

Several members of the TDP have a PNAC pedigree, including Jeb Bush, the former governor of Florida and the brother of former US President George W. Bush; and John Bolton, who was undersecretary of state and UN ambassador for Bush before becoming former US President Donald Trump's hawkish national security adviser. In the interim, Bolton headed the Galestone Institute, which the Council on American-Islamic Relations civil rights group [described as a](#) "key part of the whole Islamophobic cottage industry on the internet."

"It's time to sound the alarm on Turkey," Bolton tweeted on June 23. "Under an authoritarian leader, a once-reliable NATO ally is turning its back on democracy and embracing Russia. I'm pleased to join the @turkish\_project advisory council to shine a light on the darkening situation." Bush issued a similar message, [tweeting the same](#) day that "a democratic Turkey is essential to our security, but Turkish freedom and liberty is fading away. Turkey's authoritarian leader is intent on silencing pro-freedom voices."

The Turkish Democracy Project's CEO is Mark Wallace, who held several positions in the Bush administration and later became CEO of United Against Nuclear Iran (UANI), a pro-regime-change group. UANI's chairman is former US Senator and vice presidential candidate Joe Lieberman (D-CT), who is also on TDP's advisory board, as is UANI's intelligence chief, Norman Roule.

Robert Richer, a former associate deputy director of operations for the Central Intelligence Agency and former vice president for intelligence at the mercenary firm Blackwater, is also on the advisory board, as is Frances Townsend, a former Bush adviser on Homeland Security and Counterterrorism.

Several people initially listed as part of the council when the site went up have since been removed for unknown reasons, [archived versions](#) of the website show. Aykan Erdemir, the senior director of the Turkey program at the neoconservative Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, is one such person. A former Turkish opposition lawmaker from 2011 to 2015, he was [accused in 2017](#) of being connected to the Gülen movement and his assets were seized. According to the Turkish state-owned [Daily Sabah](#), Suleyman Ozeren, a George Mason University adjunct instructor and former head of two think tanks in Turkey who was also formerly on the TDP advisory board, is also wanted in connection with the 2016 coup. However, the outlet didn't elaborate on the charges against him.

The fabled time of Turkish "democracy" which the TDP seeks to restore in reality scarcely existed. Since the first multiparty elections in 1946, Turkey has seen a military coup in 1960; a coup "by memorandum" in 1971 accompanied by martial law, widespread torture, and open warfare against fascist, socialist, communist, and Kurdish groups; a coup in 1980; and a so-called "post-modern coup" in 1997 in which the military forced the Islamist-led coalition government to disband and the prime minister to resign. Subsequent plans for a [coup against Erdogan's](#) Justice and Development Party (AKP) called "sledgehammer" have been revealed, and a coup was attempted in 2016 against Erdogan, but ultimately failed. Erdogan blamed the coup on the Gülen movement, to which the AKP was once allied.



### Ankara Dismisses TDP as Pro-Gülen

Turkish critics have painted TDP as a part of the Gülen movement, an opposition movement allegedly headed by Fethullah Gülen, a Turkish Muslim cleric who has lived in self-imposed exile in the US since 1999. Gülen has denied responsibility for the 2016 coup attempt.

"The warmonger Bolton, the incompetent brother of Bush and the remnants of the FETÖ terrorist organization, are supposed to bring democracy to Turkey by holding with the YPG/PKK terrorists," Resul Kurt, a central executive board member of the AKP, said in reply to Bush. FETÖ refers to the Fethullah Terrorist Organisation, the Turkish government's name for the Gülen movement, and YPG and PKK are Kurdish militias regarded by Ankara as terrorist groups.

"Come on, the blood of millions of innocents is dripping from your hands," Kurt added. The Daily Sabah also labeled the Turkish Democracy Project a "platform for anti-Turkey propaganda."

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### Biden Backs Pentagon Chief's Demand to Remove Sexual Misconduct Cases From Military Chain of Command

by [Evan Craighead](#)

US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin issued a memorandum on Friday directing his department to carry out a number of reforms, including the removal of sexual assault, domestic violence and related prosecutions from the US military chain of command. Previously, US commanders decided whether such misconduct allegations would make it to court.

US President Joe Biden issued a Friday statement expressing support for the Pentagon chief's same-day announcement on implementing recommendations set forth by the Independent Review Commission on Military Sexual Assault (IRC).

Biden noted that his backing includes Austin's call for "removing the investigation and prosecution of sexual assault from the chain of command and creating highly specialized units to handle these cases and related crimes."

"Ending violence against women and eliminating sexual assault against any person in our country has been a priority for me throughout my career in public service. Sexual assault is an abuse of power and an affront to our shared humanity," [said the US president](#), who has also had [allegations of sexual misconduct](#) leveled against him.

Biden asserted that sexual assault in the US military presents a compounded issue, as it "shreds the unity and cohesion that is essential to the functioning of the US military and to our national defense."

[Per the memorandum](#) in question, Austin issued reforms based on his consultations with military and civilian leadership, as well as the IRC's recommendations, which were based on four criteria: accountability, prevention, climate and culture and victim care and support.

Overall, the IRC published 28 recommendations and 54 sub-recommendations.

In addition to separating the military chain of command from cases involving [sexual misconduct](#) and child abuse, the Pentagon chief also intends to amend the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) to create dedicated offices - with oversight - to handle the prosecution of such matters. Furthermore, the memorandum orders the UCMJ be amended to [include sexual harassment](#) as an offense.

Austin's call for UCMJ reforms comes just a few weeks after the Pentagon released an annual report detailing that 7,816 reports of sexual assault were filed among service members for 2020. At least 6,290 of the reports filed in 2020 involved active US service members, compared to 6,236 recorded in 2019.

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Back to Business? Bill Cosby Rep Teases Embattled Comedian's Return to Stand-Up, Touring by [Evan Craighead](#)

Bill Cosby, 83, was released from Pennsylvania's State Correctional Institution Phoenix on Wednesday, shortly after the state's highest court overturned a number of sexual assault convictions that carried a three to 10-year sentence. The decision came about after the disgraced actor and comedian had already served over two years behind bars.

As the public [continues to weigh in](#) on Cosby's release from prison, some venue promoters are looking to cash in on the 83-year-old's viral publicity, according to Cosby spokesperson Andrew Wyatt.

"A number of promoters have called. Comedy club owners have called. People want to see him," Wyatt told Inside Edition on Thursday.

Cosby's spokesperson revealed that his boss' first out-of-jail meal was a pizza from a restaurant in downtown Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Wyatt also revealed that Cosby - allegedly rendered completely blind due to glaucoma - had to relearn the layout of his Philadelphia home.

Andrea Constand, the woman [whose allegations of sexual assault](#) landed Cosby in jail, and her lawyers issued a statement declaring that it "is not only disappointing but of concern in that it may discourage those who seek justice for sexual assault in the criminal justice system from reporting or participating in the prosecution of the assailant."

Additionally, sexual assault victim advocate Jennifer Storm has taken a hard stance against Cosby, asserting that his release from prison changes little.

"This is not an exoneration," she said, noting the evidence in the case was not the basis on the successful appeal. "It's devastating for these survivors to watch their predator walk out of jail and walk into his home. They are slowly digesting the news and processing what happened. Feelings range from anger to disgust."

However, Wyatt expressed to Inside Edition that it was Cosby's numerous female accusers who attempted to "get away with fantastical stories."

"I have never changed my stance nor my story. I have always maintained my innocence," read a tweet from Cosby's official Twitter account, shortly after his release.



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Pennsylvania Senate Considers Arizona-Style Probe Into 2020 Election Fraud Allegations  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Reports previously emerged in mid-June detailing that a top Republican lawmaker within the Pennsylvania Legislature was weighing the possibility of bringing forth an audit of the state's voter count from the 2020 election. At the time, the official indicated the bid was in an effort to regain public trust.

Lawmakers within Pennsylvania's Republican-led Senate are considering the possibility of launching an investigation to examine how the US election was conducted within the state as voter fraud allegations have raised doubts among residents.

The investigation has been brewing for months, as many state lawmakers have engaged in several closed-door discussions on the possibility of ordering an investigation similar to the audit being conducted in [Arizona](#), which critics have been labeled a [sham](#). The troubled Arizona effort is presently running months behind schedule.

State Sen. Doug Mastriano (R-PA) has been seen as the leading force within the Legislature's conservatives, having most recently held a private briefing on Wednesday to outline his plans. Mastriano serves as the head of the Senate Intergovernmental Operations Committee, a position that would allow him to issue subpoenas to counties, so long as he obtains a majority vote of the body. He has been one of the more prominent figures in the Keystone State to voice former US President Donald Trump's unsubstantiated voter fraud claims.

Cyber Ninjas at Veterans Memorial Coliseum in Phoenix. For some conspiracy theorists, the 2020 election still hasn't ended. Trump supporters are pushing to re-examine ballots from November across the country, and finding success in swing states like Arizona and Georgia. Their efforts and sometimes misleading conclusions are being gleefully amplified by the former president.

If approved, the investigation could see a multitude of election records, including ballots and voting machines, be pulled back under the microscope.

The Associated Press [reported Friday](#) that Mastriano has also sought out legal advice to determine whether Senate Republicans have the ability to tap private funds in order to pay vendors, as well as consultants and lawyers for their "oversight investigation."

A response letter that the Republican official received from lawyer Bruce S. Marks states reportedly explains that the committee would not be prohibited from "accepting or benefiting from such financial support," although it's unclear how the Pennsylvania Supreme Court would rule on the matter.

The letter also detailed that the Arizona-style audit endeavor would be used as a means to "develop legislation which will enhance voter participation and election integrity [within the state]."

Although concerns have been raised by state lawmakers and local residents, no official election board, state prosecutor or related official has raised concerns over widespread voter fraud within the state to date.

Earlier, state Sen. David Argall (R-Schuylkill), who heads Pennsylvania's Senate State Government Committee, indicated during a [speaking engagement](#) with Spotlight PA that he supported launching an audit of the election results in order to regain the public's trust in the US voting system.

"I'm an agent of public opinion," he said at the time, noting that voter fraud concerns have been repeatedly raised by his constituents. "If we're ever going to bring trust back into the system, I think it's a good idea to take a second look or a third look."

Pennsylvania has already conducted two audits of its election results, having confirmed that US President Joe Biden won the state by more than 80,000 votes, a margin of just over 1 percentage point from Trump's votes.

While it remains unclear what rules the investigation would be conducted under, the Republican-led effort is more than likely to receive strong opposition from Democrats and face a bevy of legal challenges.

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Elsa Declared First Hurricane of 2021 Season as Cyclone Barrels Into Caribbean  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The 2021 hurricane season officially kicked off on June 1 and is expected to run until November 30. Earlier, the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) predicted that the season is likely to match the ferocity that defined the 2020 season, which saw a record 30 storms named.

Officials at the US National Hurricane Center (NHC) reclassified tropical storm Elsa as the very first hurricane of the 2021 season on Friday, marking the start of what forecasters anticipate will be a very active period across the Atlantic Ocean.

The [latest advisory](#) released by the NHC states that Hurricane Elsa is located about 95 miles from the volcanic island of Saint Vincent in the Caribbean, and is moving at a pace of 29 miles per hour in a west-northwest direction.

At present, Elsa has attained a minimum central pressure of 991 millibars and maximum sustained winds of 85 miles per hour, which would designate the storm as a Category 1 cyclone. The system's hurricane-force winds currently extend some 25 miles from the eye of the storm, with tropical storm winds reaching out at least 140 miles.

A storm surge between 1 and 3 feet is expected at the Windward Islands, with another 2 to 4 feet due along the southern coast of the island of Hispaniola. As for rainfall totals, anywhere between 4 and 9 inches may cover the Windward and Leeward islands on Friday, with isolated portions of up to 15 inches of rain. Nearby Barbados is expected to be affected as well.



“Elsa will move away from the Windward Islands during the next several hours, move across the eastern Caribbean Sea this afternoon and tonight, and move near the southern coast of Hispaniola late Saturday or Saturday night,” the NHC forecast states.

“By Sunday, Elsa is forecast to move near Jamaica and portions of eastern Cuba, and move near portions of central and western Cuba Sunday night and early Monday.”

Officials are anticipating that Elsa’s sustained wind force may decrease in strength as the cyclone moves near Cuba, before the storm makes its way stateside toward Florida, Georgia and South Carolina in the following week.

Authorities have initiated hurricane warnings along the southern coast of the Dominican Republic’s Punta Palenque to Port Au Prince, Haiti, with a hurricane watch implemented for Jamaica.

Tropical storm warnings are in effect for Grenada, Saba and Sint Eustatius and Cayman Brax and Little Cayman, as well as the northern coast of the Dominican Republic from Cabo Engano to Bahia de Manzanillo.

Prior to the start of the hurricane season, NOAA [forecasted](#) that 2021 would see between 13 and 20 named storms, noting that as many as five could become major hurricanes.

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Video: Ohio Police Chief Off Force After Putting KKK Sign on Officer’s Desk  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Authorities in Sheffield Lake, Ohio, revealed that the police chief at the center of the department’s recent misconduct case was also involved in a separate incident in which he showed off a cone made from a newspaper that resembled a KKK hood.

The police chief from Ohio’s Sheffield Lake Police Department was recently relieved of his duties after his superiors learned he placed a Ku Klux Klan sign on a desk being used by an officer.

The incident took place on June 25 and was captured on the station’s surveillance cameras, which showed dismissed Police Chief Anthony Campo rearranging an officer’s yellow police jacket to appear as the regalia worn by the notorious white supremacy group. He then leaves behind a printed note on the raincoat that reads “Ku Klux Klan.”

Footage later shows an unsuspecting officer enter the room and instantly exchange words with the chief. It’s unclear what is said between the pair as the video has no audio.

Campo is white and the officer who was given the note is black.

As two additional cops enter the room, the unidentified officer appears to inform them of what was left on his desk, all while Campo is seen peering from the corner of a connecting office. The video cuts off with the lone officer sitting at the desk, with the jacket folded over.

Campo parted ways with the force on Tuesday, after having submitted his resignation letter once the incident was referred to the police union and Sheffield Lake Mayor Dennis Bring.

Bring [told](#) local outlet Cleveland.com that he intended to immediately place Campo on administrative leave until further notice, but that when he confronted Campo over the incident, the ex-chief declared he would be resigning from the force instead.

"I came into the [former] chief's office, and he's standing there with a smile on his face," Bring recalled to the publication. "He goes, 'So, am I fired?'"

"He thought this was just a joke," the mayor added. "How can you possibly think that you can put something on somebody's jacket like that, and especially if they were African American, and think this is a joke? This is the most egregious and offensive thing you could possibly do. And it's embarrassing and disgusting."

In comments to station WKYC, Campo [told](#) the outlet that the encounter was being "overblown," as he intended it to be a joke. He further indicated that he believed he was being retaliated against over disciplinary actions dealt to other members of the station.

Bring has spoken to the officer to address Campo's behavior, using the opportunity to reiterate his stance that the city of Sheffield Lake will not tolerate any forms of racism. The mayor detailed that the officer had been in a state of shock and smiled it off as he was unsure how to react at the time.

The officer, who has only been with the department for nine months, has since retained a lawyer, although it is unclear whether he intends to file suit against Campo. Bring has stated he will back a legal effort against Campo.

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Astronomers Uncover 'Extreme' Ultra-Dense, Moon-Sized White Dwarf Nearing Collapse  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

White dwarfs are ancient stars that develop after having exhausted their nuclear fuel and expelling the majority of its outer materials. Typically, said stars carry about half the mass of the Sun and maintain a size just slightly larger than the Earth. However, that's not the case for all, it seems.

Astronomers surveying the cosmos have uncovered quite the unusual and highly unexpected find: a white dwarf star similar in size to the Earth's moon that has a mass far greater than the Sun.

Located about 130 million light-years from Earth, the star, named ZTF J1901+1458, is described as having an "extreme" magnetic field that allows it to complete one full revolution in under seven minutes.

Officials determined that the newly-discovered white dwarf is 1.35 times the mass of the Sun, with a diameter that measures in at about 2,670 miles, nearly 500 miles more than the Earth's moon.

At the recorded diameter, the measurement ranks the star as among one of the smallest white dwarfs tracked by astronomers. Previous record-holders were stars RE J0317-853 and WD 1832+089, both of which had diameters measuring roughly 3,100 miles.



Astronomers believe that the white dwarf is the result of two less massive, orbiting white dwarf stars that eventually collided with one another and merged. It's also thought that the subject may later evolve into a neutron star.

"This is highly speculative, but it's possible that the white dwarf is massive enough to further collapse into a neutron star," Ilaria Caiazzo, the lead author of the study, said in a [statement](#) released by the Keck Observatory.

Although the star was discovered by the Zwicky Transient Facility at Caltech's Palomar Observatory, several additional observatories, including Keck, aided in astronomers' efforts to uncover details of the find.

"[The star] is so massive and dense that, in its core, electrons are being captured by protons in nuclei to form neutrons. Because the pressure from electrons pushes against the force of gravity, keeping the star intact, the core collapses when a large enough number of electrons are removed," Caiazzo added.

As the discovery has only marked the beginning of the investigation into the "very special" star, officials intend to use the revelation to further understand the occurrence of white dwarfs.

The team's findings were [published](#) in the July issue of the journal Nature.

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#### US Has Strong Unofficial Ties With Taiwan, Does Not Support Independence - White House

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) – The US maintains a strong unofficial relationship with Taiwan but does not support its independence from China and would welcome the country playing a more prominent international role, White House Policy Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific Kurt Campbell said on Tuesday.

"We support a strong unofficial relationship with Taiwan. We do not support Taiwan independence. We fully recognize them and understand the sensitivities involved here. We do believe that Taiwan has a right to live in peace. We want to see its international role, particularly in areas like vaccines and issues associated with the pandemic. They [Taiwan] should have a role to play here. They should not be shunned in the international community," Campbell said during a conversation with Asia Society, a non-profit organization.

Campbell has also warned that China's efforts to undertake similar steps it had made in Hong Kong with respect to Taiwan would be "catastrophic" while the US with its international partners will continue signaling "accordingly" to Beijing in case its steps are completely antithetical to international order.

Taiwan has been governed independently from mainland China since 1949. Beijing views the island as its province, while Taiwan — a territory with its own democratically elected government — maintains that it is an autonomous country and has political and economic relations with several other nations that recognize its sovereignty. Beijing vociferously denies its independence as it sees itself as the only legitimate political representative of the Chinese people anywhere.

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US Urges States to Apply For \$600Mln in Aid For Homeless Students - Education Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) – The Biden administration invited individual states to apply for an additional \$600 million from the American Rescue Plan to aid students experiencing homelessness, the Education Department said on Tuesday.

"In April, the Department released the first \$200 million of the \$800 million in ARP-HCY [American Rescue Plan - Homeless Children and Youth] funds to states. The distribution of the additional \$600 million will give states and school districts access to funding before the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year," a department press release said.

ARP-HCY refers to the Homeless Children and Youth Fund earmark in the \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 focused American Rescue Plan Act.

"I encourage every state to urgently use these American Rescue Plan funds to support homeless children and youth so that these students have every chance to participate in summer learning and enrichment; experience full-time, in-person instruction in their schools in the fall; and get connected to vital services and supports that can support their success," Education Secretary Miguel Cardona said in the release.

The release noted that the shift by schools to remote learning during the pandemic disproportionately impacted homeless students due to limited internet access.

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Biden to Host Australian, Indian, Japanese Leaders Later This Year - White House

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will host the leaders of Australia, India and Japan later this year, White House Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific Kurt Campbell said on Tuesday.

"You will see [our cooperation] later this year when the president [Biden] hosts the Quad leaders in Washington. You'll see some commitments," Campbell said at an online event hosted by the Asia Society group.

He added that the summit should bring "decisive" commitments on such issues as vaccine diplomacy and infrastructure.

The Quad, also known as Quadrilateral Security Dialogue is a strategic dialogue between the US, Japan, Australia and India during which the sides discuss economic and military cooperation. Its first inklings go back to 2007 but a recent resurgence is largely seen as a strategy to counter China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region.

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## Russian Man Convicted of Hacking Attempt on Tesla Awaits Deportation

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) - Russian citizen Egor Kriuchkov, convicted for an attempted cyberattack on Tesla, has not yet been deported to Russia and remains in custody, despite having served the time, Lori Haley, a spokeswoman for the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), told Sputnik on Monday.

Human rights activists and foreign prisoners often complain about long detention periods leading up to deportation after serving a prison sentence in the US. The waiting time can amount to several months due to administrative delays and transportation issues. The US authorities prefer not to release convicted foreigners before deportation for fear that they will remain in the country illegally.

On May 24, Kriuchkov was sentenced to a term of 10 months served in a US prison. However, he has not been released and currently awaits deportation.

"On June 16, an immigration judge ordered Kriuchkov removed to Russia; he remains in ICE custody pending removal," Haley said.

According to the official, Kriuchkov is in the US illegally, as he arrived in the country on a visa in July 2020, but failed to leave before the expiration date, violating the rules of stay.

Kryuchkov pleaded guilty to an attempted cyberattack on Tesla's computer network. He was arrested in August 2020 after arriving in the US on a tourist visa in July. Tesla founder Elon Musk said that the target of the cyberattack was his electric vehicles manufacturing plant in the state of Nevada.

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## Mars Helicopter Ingenuity Successfully Completes 9th, Most Challenging Flight - NASA

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) - The Ingenuity Mars helicopter has successfully completed its ninth and most challenging mission so far, NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory reported on Monday.

"#MarsHelicopter pushes its Red Planet limits. The rotorcraft completed its 9th and most challenging flight yet, flying for 166.4 seconds at a speed of 5 m/s," the spacecraft's developer tweeted.

The tweet was accompanied by a photo of Ingenuity's shadow captured by its navigation camera.

The Mars helicopter has surpassed the original expectations of its creators after successfully dealing with increasingly complex tasks. This time, the craft flew about 625 meters (0.4 miles) at the fastest speed since the beginning of the experiments in April.

According to NASA, the experiments with Ingenuity are critical to understanding the future of transportation on Mars. Presumably, flying is the most reliable and fastest way to travel around the planet.

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#### **US Arctic Convoy Shipments to USSR Played Key Role in Nazi Defeat - WWII Veteran**

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) - US Arctic convoy members fully understood the vital importance of getting arms and food to the Soviet Union in the fight against the Nazis during World War II, American Navy veteran Wallace Leroy Orsund told Sputnik.

During World War II, about 1,400 merchant ships escorted by the US and other allies delivered critical supplies to the Soviet Union under the Lend-Lease program.

"We understood the importance of such support. We knew about the lack of food in the Soviet Union, and I know as a fact that the armament, which we sent, was really in need because you were in a war," said Orsund, who participated in one Arctic convoy in the summer of 1943. "I know that these convoys made a difference in defeating the Germans."

#### **WE OPENED FIRE AND 'GOT THEM'**

Orsund, now 97, was born in the state of North Dakota, but both of his parents had Norwegian roots. He was only 17 years old when he enlisted in the US Navy in 1941.

After boot camp in Texas, he served on the USS Texas until August 1942, when he joined the famous USS Alabama, which received nine Battle Stars during World War II. From May to August 1943, Alabama joined other Navy and merchant marine ships in the Arctic convoy to the USSR.

"When we took off from Scapa Flow, there were a lot of merchant ships loaded down with supplies for Murmansk," Orsund said. "Second or third day after we left Scapa Flow, we joined up with another convoy - it was huge, as we could see, it was ship after ship after ship."

It is an irony of fate that the Nazis attacked the convoy for the first time when it was near Norway's shore. Orsund was on duty that time and saw how the German reconnaissance plane flew over the ships.

"We opened fire, it was 5 miles away, and we got them," he said.

The veteran does not remember how many ships the Nazis destroyed, but recalled how the allies' destroyer appeared just near the USS Alabama and began throwing depth charges.

"That means that German submarines were close to us," he noted.

Despite all this Orsund said "I was never scared."

Asked about cargo the convoy brought to the Soviet Union, Orsund mentioned "tanks after tanks after tanks" along with food supplies.

When it arrived to Murmansk, the USS Alabama stayed out of the port, which simply had no space to accept such a big battleship. It was patrolling the surrounding area in case the Germans attacked.

The veteran recalled how the Soviet boat appeared near their ship: "I said: 'Hi guys, we have cigarettes over there.' We threw them cigarettes – package after package. Finally, one guy came back with a box, and it was full of cigars. I do not think I was seeing cigars before that."

#### **WHEN WAR WAS OVER, WE CRIED 'PEACE! PEACE!'**

After that visit to Murmansk, Orsund never came back to Russia, but had several other war assignments and participated in different battles.



This included the aerial part of the Battle of the Philippine Sea in June 1944, also known as the Great Marianas Turkey Shoot, when the Japanese flew over them, he said.

"That lasted three days and three nights," Orsund said. "When it was all over, we had shut down 372 airplanes."

When Japan capitulated, Orsund was just 100 miles from Tokyo.

"There was an announcement that the war was over. I was 21-years-old, and I was really happy after years of fighting. We cried "Peace! Peace! Peace!" he said with tears in his voice.

#### PROUD TO BE PART OF ARCTIC CONVOYS

Orsund said he understands the importance of convoy allies sent to the Soviet Union. He could not even guess how many tanks and other supplies Russia received that way.

"I am proud to be a part of that," he said.

In 2020, the Russian Government awarded about 20 US participants of Arctic convoys, including Orsund, with the special Medal of Ushakov for bravery and courage in naval operations.

"I really love the medal," the veteran said.

He expressed regret that most everyday Americans know nothing about Arctic convoys.

"Before, people studied World War II at school, but they do not even study it now. The convoys and things like that were not even mentioned," Orsund said. "I have no explanation why. It is very much a pity."

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#### US Arctic Convoy War Veteran: 'We Felt God Will Save Us When Nazi Torpedoes Hit'

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) - The German military unleashed horrific attacks on the Arctic convoy known as PQ17, tasked by the Allies with delivering vital supplies to the Soviet Union during World War II, but the convoy succeeded in completing the mission, US war veteran and convoy sailor James Baker North told Sputnik.

"I was never afraid. I was always feeling that God will save me," Baker said in an interview ahead of the 79th anniversary of the PQ17 mission.

In late June of 1942, the Allies directed 35 ships to supply more than 60,000 tons of much needed war supplies to the Soviet Union. However, the Nazi German military located the convoy on July 1 and started relentless attacks by utilizing its air force and submarines that resulted in the sinking of 24 ships.

"All of the experiences of the 11 [surviving] ships were providential," North said, relaying the belief of many sailors that providence itself allowed them to successfully complete the mission. The losses sustained during the PQ17 convoy operation are considered by many historians to be the result of one of the most tragic blunders during World War II. Namely, British Royal Navy commanding officer Dudley Pound acted on information that the super-battleship Tirpitz was moving in to intercept the PQ17 and ordered the warships guarding the convoy to leave. Pound also directed the merchant vessels to scatter.

While the super-battleship Tirpiz never appeared, the German military began sustained attacks on July 4 to terrorize and destroy the unprotected convoy.

#### ENLISTED TO JOIN THE PQ17 FLEET

North said he was 19-years-old when he enlisted as a sailor to serve in the merchant ship Troubadour that was assigned shortly thereafter to join the PQ17 convoy.

"I had absolutely no experience, but they had nobody to send and I was offered an extra \$500. I was a farm boy and it sounded like a lot of money to me," he said.

North said he later used the money to buy a farm in the US state of Arkansas where he met his future wife to whom he has been married to for more than 75 years.

The war veteran explained that the Troubadour was carrying tanks and ammunition and there was so much cargo that it took months to unload it once the vessel reached the Soviet port of Molotovsk (now Severodvinsk).

North emphasized that on their way to Soviet ports such as Arkhangelsk, the convoy was subjected to a "real Hell" from Nazi attacks.

"It was Hell up there to watch what was going on and my ship not get it. I kept on saying 'Oh my God,'" he said.

North noted that the British naval ships left the convoy without providing any explanation why they did so, contributing to a sense of abandonment among the convoy's sailors.

"All we knew was that the British were being told to disperse and everybody was supposed to spread out. We did not know why. We felt abandoned," he said.

North said it was symbolic that the German military began attacking the PQ17 convoy on July 4 - the US Independence Day - and important date to all Americans. However, he said that day in 1942 was a bad day for the convoy's sailors given how many ships were sunk and people were lost.

"Of the 11 ships that made it to Russia, one was so badly damaged that they did not try sail at all after the mission," he said. "Probably it was a miracle, but the Troubadour was not damaged in this hell. One torpedo hit the vessel but did not destroy it."

North acknowledged that watching the torpedo hit the Troubadour was perhaps the most remarkable moment for him during the war.

"We all saw the torpedo coming. It glanced off of the ship and continued on. It went around the ship when it glanced off and started coming back. A naval officer on our ship sank it with the machine gun," he said.

#### HIDING IN THE ARCTIC ICE

North explained that Troubadour's captain was a Norwegian who knew to deceive the pursuing German forces and hide the ship in the Arctic. The captain decided to "go to the ice" and that way reach the Soviet islands of Novaya Zemlya.

"We spent three or four days there. We just kept on painting our ship white," he said, adding that following orders and performing all the given tasks contributed to lessen the pressure of being in a dangerous situation.

The Troubadour then continued on its way to the Soviet mainland and after arriving at the port of Molotovsk was greeted by two Soviet officials who provided the US sailors a sum of rubles to spend during their stay in the Soviet Union, North said.

"These men told us a place where we could buy food and drinks. Everybody left the ship and got something to drink," he said.



North said he received 60 rubles in total and used some to try vodka for the first time in his life as well as purchase brown bread and refreshments.

"We were there two months, so I learned quite a lot of the Russian language," he said recalling several words in Russian.

However, North acknowledged that the US sailors had not much chance to establish contacts with the local Russians given that they lived in a separate campus and due to concerns for their safety.

North recalled how he came to a dance hall one day to mingle with the locals but spent the whole evening talking with a Jewish boy whose parents had been evacuated to Molotovsk from the another city.

#### ENDURING MORE ATTACKS ON THE WAY BACK

After their stay in Russia following the delivery of the cargo, eight out of the 11 ships left Molotovsk, North said.

The Troubadour, the oldest ship in the flotilla that had to use all of its coal to maneuver and reach its destinations, headed to Novaya Zemlya as per its captain's orders, he noted. However, North added that the danger of German attacks was still very much present on the way to Novaya Zemlya and beyond.

"That is where another torpedo missed us very closely," North said. "We could see it go by. We went to Novaya Zemlya, got a good coal and then were able to make it back."

An alleviating circumstance in the otherwise dangerous situation was the weather, which was so bad that it actually prevented German submarines from locating the convoy on its way to Iceland and thus resulted in no casualties, he said.

The veteran pointed out that after returning back, he made several trips with merchant convoys to different countries, but then got married and settled down.

North emphasized that the PQ17 convoy became a very significant part of his life despite not discussing his experiences with others, even with his wife.

"I did not talk too much with my wife about that as well," he said, adding that in the emotionally charged war years he did not condemn the British officers who left the merchant ships undefended nor the Germans who sought to disrupt and destroy the PQ17 convoy.

"I read quite a bit about it and I understand the anger that others may have felt. But personally, I have no problem to shake the hands of those British officers and no problem shaking the hands of the Germans, or the Japanese. I do not hold hatred from the war," North concluded.

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RPT - Volunteers Seek Housing for Those Displaced by Surfside Building Collapse in Florida

SURFSIDE, July 2 (Sputnik) - Volunteers have everything necessary to support people affected by the Surfside building collapse in Miami, Florida but are looking for housing for those displaced, Dalia Blumstein, local resident and volunteer, told Sputnik.

On Thursday, US President Joe Biden said the US federal emergency agency would provide temporary housing for survivors, in addition to expediting visas for relatives.

"We are not accepting any more donations. It's local people donating but we are at capacity. We don't need any more," Blumstein said, noting that local residents have been donating everything necessary including food and clothing.

She also said churches and synagogues are involved in the aid efforts.

When asked what are the most urgent needs, she said, "Right now, it's finding homes in the community. That's important to the displaced people because this is where they have lived and this is where they want to stay."

Their children, she added, go to schools here and they have support in this community. She said it was a beautiful thing to see local people offering homes to those in need.

Blumstein went on to say that there is also a resource center nearby where all the families can go to get social security cards, drivers licenses, phones, gift cards, and other essential things.

"And then the Red Cross is here, FEMA, so they have all the support you know but going forward it's going to be a day to day thing," she added.

Moreover, Blumstein noted that they even found masseuses that provide some 15-minute massages to the responders to give them some relief after lifting heavy weights.

Blumstein has been a Surfside resident for 20 years.

"That's what brings me here. I just felt when it happened," she shared why she came to work as a volunteer at the Surfside Community Center. "I just felt internally that I couldn't continue with my routine, that I have the ability as an at-home mom to have extra time and I felt that I needed to be involved in some capacity. So, that's how it all began. It has been such an amazing experience to see the outpouring of love, not only from our amazing Surfside community but from all over. I've been here every day."

She said some people are coming from other towns.

"I had a woman coming on a bus for 3 hours to drop off a teddy bear and a toy for a child because she knew how it felt to lose a loved one. And it's just a beautiful thing to be a part of," Blumstein added.

She noted that there are dozens of volunteers working 24/7 there trying to support those affected by the tragedy.

"There is an entire kitchen in the back, a kosher kitchen. We are feeding everybody - first responders, the family that comes, so it's a 24 hour operation.

When asked how the people affected are doing at the moment, she said, "as you can expect, it's devastating, it's a shock."

Blumstein shared that volunteering at the center helps her, keeping busy.

"I really haven't had much of a time to let it sink in. Little by little I feel like this is what I need to do now," she explained. "It's a shock. It's devastating to see those pictures on TV. I can't believe it's, but it's the reality and we just have to support the survivors,"

According to the latest figures, updated daily by Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava, the bodies of 20 people have so far been retrieved from under the rubble, with 128 people unaccounted for and 188 accounted for.

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RPT - US Federal Execution Halt Seen as Step Forward, But Pressure Now on Biden to Do More - NGO

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) - US activists are viewing the temporary moratorium on federal executions as a small but encouraging step forward, although many will be frustrated if President Joe Biden does not do even more, Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC) Executive Director Robert Dunham told Sputnik.

On Thursday, US Attorney General Merrick Garland imposed a temporary moratorium on federal executions as the Justice Department reviews the Trump administration's decision to revive the practice after a 17-year hiatus. During the final six or seven months of then-President Donald Trump's term, the federal government put 13 inmates to death.

"I think proponents of repealing the death penalty see this as a small step forward, but an encouraging step forward," Dunham said. "They will be very frustrated and upset if this is as far as it goes, but they're expecting Biden to go further."

While running for the White House, Biden promised to end federal executions, and has encouraged states to jettison the practice.

Dunham, who has 25 years of experience as a capital litigator - including arguing death penalty cases before the US Supreme Court - said the announcement by the Justice Department is more symbolic than substantive.

"It isn't a moratorium in the sense of the pronouncement of Biden policy. It is a pronouncement that they don't intend to execute anybody while looking at the Trump administration's policy," Dunham said. "Everyone understands that 'moratorium' is not the last word of the administration on capital punishment, it's the first word. It's the first step towards formulation of death penalty policy."

The Justice Department will use the pause to look at regulatory changes brought about by the Trump administration in the last two years.

"The review is trying to figure out things that made the death penalty worse. They are not looking at the problem before the Trump administration," he said.

If the Biden administration is serious about eliminating the death penalty at the federal level, it can ensure that there are no more death sentences while reversing those authorized by Trump, Dunham explained.

"To reach that goal, the president can commute the entire death row. He can do that today, tomorrow, anytime while he's in office, independent of anyone. This would lead to the disappearance of death row as a practical matter and he can do this without Congress," Dunham said.

To end the death penalty entirely, including at the state level, Biden needs Congress to pass the repeal bill, which will require bipartisan support, Dunham said.

Although Dunham said his organization does not take a position on the death penalty, he provided an assessment for those who believe it helps deter crime.

"Anybody who is interested in the death penalty as a matter of policy knows this is 'stupid on crime.' The death penalty is not a deterrent, doesn't make police or the public safer and money is taken away from elsewhere to fund it," he said.

Dunham noted that the federal moratorium does not have anything to do with executions by state governments. According to DCIP data, there have been 1,534 executions in the states since 1976, about 38 percent of which were carried out in Texas, compared to a total of 16 at the federal level during the same time period

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RPT - 'Secret Satellite' Launched From ISS Turns Out to Be Japanese CubeSat – US Space Command

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) – The US Space Command (USSPACECOM) has clarified recent reports of a “secret satellite” launched from the International Space Station (ISS) which actually was a Japanese CubeSat mistakenly registered by the space tracking service as an American object, USSPACECOM Director of Public Affairs, Lieutenant Colonel Erin Dick told Sputnik.

Sputnik reported on Thursday that the United States had secretly launched a satellite from its segment of the ISS, cataloged by the space-track.org service as BD-28 with an American country code. The fact puzzled many while some offered their explanations for this, including the American astronomer Jonathan McDowell who suggested on Twitter that the satellite could belong to a private US company that didn't want to attract attention to its activities.

“It turns out there was an error in what was posted on space-track.org, and it has since been updated,” Dick said. “BD-28, also referred to as G-Satellite 2, is a Japanese CubeSat. The country code for BD-28 will be updated to JPN.”

CubeSats are miniature satellites used for space research that weigh up to 3 pounds and have a cubical shape.

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RPT - 'It Reminded Me of 9/11' - Surfside Collapse Witness

SURFSIDE, Florida, July 2 (Sputnik) - Rainer Sandoval, a Venezuelan national, told Sputnik he has now witnessed two major tragedies that struck the United States, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, and the building collapse in Surfside, Florida on June 24, 2021.

Sandoval told Sputnik he lived in New York City for many years before moving to with his partner to Surfside, settling in a house within minutes of the now-collapsed building. “I open my house door and I can see the building,” he noted.

“I was sleeping. Everything was silent, and then I heard something... The sound was, oh my gosh, it was incredible. I can't describe it,” Sandoval said of the night of the tragedy. “I was living in New York when 9/11 happened, so it reminded me of 9/11 because it was horrible for me to



live through. That experience was really, really bad because I saw the second plane crash into the second tower, and I saw the tower collapse. So, it was horrible, horrible, horrible. And when I saw this, you know, it reminded me of what I lived through in New York. It was horrible."

Sandoval noted that when he exited his hallway, he saw plenty of smoke and immediately rushed towards the building.

He noted that he first saw the left part of the building collapse, and several seconds later, the second part collapsed

"A lot of people were crying walking around the scene. You could also hear people screaming from the building," he said. "I heard a lot of people screaming, crying."

"I saw all that and I couldn't breathe because I also have sinus," he noted.

He went on to describe the panic that swept through the residents of the neighboring parts of the condo, fearing the rest of the structure could also come down.

"People were praying on the balconies because they saw everything. They thought they were going to die because they say that the building collapsed, and the other collapsed, and thought maybe this building is going to collapse too. So, a lot people were crying," Sandoval said.

He noted that firefighters came right away and put the ladders to get people down. "Many people were rescued, even old ones," he said.

Sandoval went on to say that the atmosphere became hysterical as many people were trying to help but couldn't.

"A lot of people who were walking around tried to help people, but how? They didn't have anything. Everybody was crying, Everybody was hysterical because it was impossible to help them," he said.

Sandoval went on to lament the flight of residents from the neighboring buildings but was understanding of the concerns of the residents.

"Nobody wants to be in such a situation. I prefer to have my relatives safe. It is so sad," he said.

"They think that something may happen and want to move out."

According to the latest figures, updated daily by Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava, the bodies of 20 people have so far been retrieved from under the rubble, with 128 people unaccounted for and 188 accounted for.

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While running for the White House, Biden promised to end federal executions, and has encouraged states to jettison the practice.

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Death Toll in Florida Building Collapse Rises to 22, 126 People Still Missing - Mayor



WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) - The death toll in the Surfside, Florida, condominium building collapse increased to 22 after two additional bodies were recovered from the rubble, Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava told reporters.

"Over the course of today's search, we did recover two additional victims, we now have 22 confirmed deaths," Cava said on Friday evening.

Cava noted that 126 people are still unaccounted for.

The mayor said she signed an emergency order authorizing the demolition of the remainder of the 12-story building that is still standing due to safety concerns, but engineers are still evaluating the best timeline to begin demolition and a decision is expected in the coming weeks.

Cava underscored that emergency crews will not take any action that will jeopardize ongoing search and rescue operations.

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PREVIEW: Trump to Hold a 'Save America' Rally in Florida Saturday

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump will hold a "Save America" rally for his supporters in Sarasota, Florida, on Saturday.

The rally, which is cosponsored by the Republican Party of Florida, will be an all-day event to support Trump's Make America Great (MAGA) agenda and celebrate the achievements of his administration. The event will also commemorate the United States on the eve of Independence Day - July 4 - with a fireworks show.

Two weeks ago, Trump held a rally in the US state of Ohio amid thousands of supporters during which he called the results of the Biden administration's performance a "catastrophe" and criticized the administration for the crime wave in major cities throughout the United States, the migrant crisis at the southern US border and a dismal economic situation marred with high inflation.

Trump also criticized the Biden administration for what he called are failures in foreign policy, including that China and Russia are humiliating the United States and the failure to prevent the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

US media has reported that the Trump team is involved in creating a new social media platform called GETTR that could help the former president bypass censorship from social media networks like Twitter and Facebook.

While some pundits have interpreted Trump's rallies as a signal he would run in the 2024 presidential election, others have said things are not quite clear cut. Trump had previously indicated he planned on running once again, but now he says the decision depends on the state of affairs in the United States and the Republican Party.

Speculations about whether Trump would run arose after he visited the US-Mexico border during which he said, "Do you think I should [run] again? Maybe we don't need to. Maybe we won't even have to."

Trump has also announced several events in December, including two tour stops in Sunrise and Orlando, Florida, the second of which will feature a conversation between him and commentator Bill O'Reilly. The former president will then will visit Houston and Dallas in the state of Texas.

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#### Wall Street Storms to Records Q3 Opening Week After US Jobs Beat Forecast

NEW YORK, July 2 (Sputnik) - US stocks made their third-quarter weekly debut with records high for the blue-chip S&P 500 and tech-heavy Nasdaq Composite indexes as strong jobs numbers for June signaled further recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.

The S&P 500 index, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, raced to an all-time high of 4,355 before closing at 4,351. It was up 0.7% on the day and 1.6% on the week and quarter, extending its second-quarter gain of 8%.

Nasdaq, which includes high-flying tech stocks such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, Netflix and Google, hit a record high of 14,649 before settling at 14,639. It rose 0.8% on the day and 1.9% on the week and quarter, after the previous quarterly gain of nearly 10%.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the broadest US equity barometer on the New York Stock Exchange, finished at 34,786, rising 0.4% on the day and 1.0% on the week and quarter. The Dow was the only laggard among major US equity indices in the second quarter, falling 4.6%.

This week's rally came after the Labor Department's non-farm payrolls report for June showed that US employers added 850,000 jobs in June, at least 100,000 above average forecast levels, signaling further economic recovery from the COVID-19.

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#### SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) -



#### MACRON-PUTIN TALKS

\* Russia is ready to have a normal dialogue with the European Union if the bloc shows interest in it, Russian President Vladimir Putin told his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron during a phone conversation on Friday, the Kremlin said.

\* Macron told Putin that France desires to see more trusting relations between the European Union and Russia, the Elysee Palace said.

#### OPEC+ MEETING

\* The OPEC+ countries on Friday failed to reach an agreement extending the oil cuts deal and the volume of the output limitations as the OPEC confirmed that the meeting would reconvene on Monday.

#### US SANCTIONS

\* The United States has imposed sanctions on 22 individuals in Myanmar, including seven key military officials, the US Treasury Department said in a release on Friday.

\* The US has taken three Iranian nationals off of the Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons (SDN) list, the Treasury Department SAID.

#### BELARUS SECURITY SITUATION

\* Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko on Friday instructed the country's border forces to fully close the Belarusian border with Ukraine from where a "huge amount of weapons" comes from.

\* Lukashenko said on Friday that the United States, Ukraine, Germany, Poland and Lithuania are connected to terrorist "sleeper" cells that have been identified in Belarus.

\* Lukashenko said "self-defense units" tried to undermine the work of a site of the communications center of the Russian Navy in the Belarusian city of Vileyka and this situation was discussed during his recent conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

#### NORD STREAM 2

\* Republican Senator Ted Cruz is blocking 13 of President Joe Biden's nominees for State Department positions to force the US government to re-impose economic sanctions on the company building Russia's Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline to Europe, US news reported on Friday.

#### SYRIA DEVELOPMENTS

\* Militants, together with the "White Helmets" group, are preparing a staged "chemical attack" in Syria's Idlib province, Rear Adm. Vadim Kulit, deputy head of the Russian Center for the Reconciliation of Warring Parties in Syria, said on Friday.

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US Will Establish Office in Qatar to Support Afghan Forces After Pullout - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has approved creating a security cooperation office in Qatar with Brig. Gen. Curtis Buzzard as its head to support the Afghan national defense forces, Defense Department spokesman John Kirby said on Friday. "The Secretary also approved the establishment of US Forces-Afghanistan Forward to be led by Navy Rear Admiral Peter Vasely, where Admiral Vasely's command will be based in Kabul, and will be supported by Brigadier General Curtis Buzzard, who will lead the Defense Security Cooperation Management Office-Afghanistan. That office will be based in Qatar, and will administer funding support for the Afghan national defense and security forces to include over the horizon, aircraft maintenance support," Kirby said.

The remaining US presence in Afghanistan will be focused on protecting the US diplomatic presence in the country, supporting security requirements at the Kabul airport, advising and assisting the Afghan national defense and security forces and supporting counterterrorism efforts, Kirby added.

Earlier on Friday, the US military handed control of the Bagram Air Base outside of Kabul to the Afghan national defense forces.

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**Tigray Problem Must Remain Domestic Issue, Unacceptable to Politicize It - Nebenzia**

UNITED NATIONS, July 2 (Sputnik) - Russia believes the conflict in Tigray must remain a domestic Ethiopian issue and that politicizing it in the UN Security Council is unacceptable, Russian Permanent Representative to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said during a council's meeting on Friday.

After holding six closed meetings on the conflict between the Ethiopian government and the opposition Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the UN Security Council gathered to discuss the war in a public meeting for the first time on Friday.

"We believe it is unacceptable to politicize this problem, the situation in Tigray must remain a domestic issue of Ethiopia," Nebenzia said. "We believe that interference by the Security Council in solving it is counterproductive."

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**US to Donate 4Mln Moderna Vaccine Doses to Indonesia – National Security Council**

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) – The United States is sending 4 million doses of Moderna vaccine against COVID-19 to Indonesia without delay, National Security Council (NSC) Spokesperson Emily Horne announced on Friday.

"National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan spoke today with Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi of Indonesia," Horne said. "Mr. Sullivan noted that the United States will be donating 4 million



Moderna vaccine doses to Indonesia and that these doses will be shipped via COVAX as soon as possible."

Sullivan underscored US support for the people of Indonesia as they fight a surge in COVID-19 cases, Horne noted.

Sullivan and Marsudi also "discussed US plans to increase assistance for Indonesia's broader COVID-19 response efforts," she said.

Sullivan highlighted the importance that the Biden administration placed on Indonesia, Southeast Asia and ending the COVID-19 pandemic, Horne added.

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#### **Biden Boosts Federal Funding for Florida Building Collapse Disaster Aid - White House**

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has expanded the federal government emergency assistance to the state of Florida to finance increased protective measures following the Surfside building collapse, in which more than 160 people are believed to have lost their lives, the White House announced on Friday.

"Today, President Joseph Biden made additional assistance available to the State of Florida by authorizing an increase in the level of federal funding for debris removal and emergency protective measures undertaken in the State of Florida as a result of the Surfside Building Collapse," the White House said in a statement.

Under the emergency declaration issued on June 25, federal aid was made available for the Individuals and Households Program under the Stafford Act and assistance for debris removal and emergency protective measures, including direct federal assistance, was set at 75 percent of costs, the statement noted.

"Under the President's order today, the federal share for debris removal and emergency protective measures, including direct federal assistance, under the Public Assistance program has been increased to 100 percent of the total eligible costs," the statement said.

The funding will continue until July 24, the statement added.

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#### **US Forces Leave Largest Air Base in Afghanistan - Pentagon**

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) - The US has handed over control of the Bagram Air Base outside of Kabul to Afghan forces and withdrawn strike capabilities as part of the ongoing drawdown of forces from the country, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said on Friday.

"There are some aviation elements that we retained at the airport, but in terms of the kinds of strike capabilities that I think you're talking about, those are no longer in Afghanistan," Kirby said in response to a question about whether the US still has air assets at the base.

The base, which was the largest in the country, has hosted US forces since the beginning of the conflict in 2001. It is also home to the Parwan Detention Facility, which is the main facility used to hold individuals detained by US forces in Afghanistan.

"This change in leadership structure, and the turnover today of Bagram Air Base to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces are key milestones in our drawdown process," the spokesman added.

A Taliban spokesperson praised the move, saying that it is a positive step in the interest of both the US and Afghanistan that will help achieve peace and security in the country.

The move is part of an ongoing retrograde of US forces from the country at the direction of President Joe Biden. The withdrawal is expected to be completed by the end of August, with the deadline set for September 11 of this year – the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks that sparked the conflict.

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#### **CENTCOM Chief to Take Over Command of US Afghan Mission - Pentagon**

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) - Central Command (CENTCOM) head Gen. Frank McKenzie will assume command authority over the US forces in Afghanistan from Gen. Scott Miller later this month, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said on Friday.

"As part of our ongoing drawdown process, the Secretary [of Defense Lloyd Austin] approved a plan, today, to transfer command authority over our mission in Afghanistan from General Scott Miller to General Frank McKenzie. We expect that transfer to be affected later this month. John Miller will remain in theater in coming weeks to prepare for and to complete the turnover of these duties and responsibilities to General McKenzie," Kirby said during a press briefing. Kirby underscored that McKenzie will retain all existing authorities as a commander of the US forces in Afghanistan and continue to be responsible for the conduct of all counterterrorism operations against threats emanating from the country.

McKenzie will also lead the US efforts for technical and logistical support to Afghan forces following the full withdrawal of American forces, Kirby added.

General Scott Miller has been the commander of the US forces in Afghanistan since September 2, 2018.

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#### **US State Dept. Warns Americans in Tigray to Shelter in Place Amid Unrest**

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) - The US State Department issued an alert on Friday urging Americans in the Tigray region to shelter in place amid the current unrest following clashes between the Ethiopian government and local rebel forces.

On Monday, the Ethiopian government declared an unconditional ceasefire in the province following the recapture of the regional capital of Mekelle by rebel forces that prompted government forces to retreat. However, the government's military has threatened to send troops back into Tigray, highlighting the fragility of any current calm in the region.

"US citizens in Tigray should shelter in place. We are working on relocation plans for US citizens in Mekele," the alert said. "If you are a US citizen in Tigray or you have a US citizen family member in Mekele, please contact us."

Clashes in the province of Tigray erupted in November after the Ethiopian government accused the local ruling party — the Tigray People's Liberation Front — of ambushing a regional army post to hijack weapons and arm anti-government militia. The Tigray region has been occupied by the Ethiopian military since, leading to fighting with the rebels.

An estimated two million of Tigray's six million people are reported to have fled their homes and an estimated 900,000 people are likely experiencing famine conditions. In addition, about 33,000 severely malnourished children are projected to face imminent risk of death if more aid is not forthcoming to the people of Tigray.

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#### US Considering Military Cooperation with Uzbekistan, Tajikistan After Leaving Afghanistan

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) - The US has been discussing the possibility of using Uzbekistan or Tajikistan as locations for nearby operating bases for "over-the-horizon" operations in Afghanistan, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said on Friday.

"I think it's safe to assume that we in concert with our State Department colleagues are talking to neighboring nations and trying to explore over-the-horizon opportunities that might exist there. I'll let those two nations [Uzbekistan and Tajikistan] speak for themselves," Kirby said in response to a question about the possibility.

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#### UN Political Affairs Chief Calls For Full Withdrawal of Eritrean Forces from Tigray

UNITED NATIONS, July 2 (Sputnik) - UN Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs Rosemary DiCarlo on Friday called for the withdrawal of all Eritrean forces fighting in Ethiopia's Tigray region.

"Ethiopia's neighbors can play a constructive role in supporting the country's transition while respecting its sovereignty," DiCarlo said in a first public meeting by the UN Security Council on the issue. "The withdrawal of Eritrean forces from Tigray must be fully implemented."



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#### **Volunteers Seek Housing for Those Displaced by Surfside Building Collapse in Florida**

SURFSIDE, July 2 (Sputnik) - Volunteers have everything necessary to support people affected by the Surfside building collapse in Miami, Florida but are looking for housing for those displaced, Dalia Blumstein, local resident and volunteer, told Sputnik on Friday.

On Thursday, US President Joe Biden said the US federal emergency agency would provide temporary housing for survivors, in addition to expediting visas for relatives.

"We are not accepting any more donations. It's local people donating but we are at capacity. We don't need any more," Blumstein said, noting that local residents have been donating everything necessary including food and clothing.

She also said churches and synagogues are involved in the aid efforts.

When asked what are the most urgent needs, she said, "Right now, it's finding homes in the community. That's important to the displaced people because this is where they have lived and this is where they want to stay."

Their children, she added, go to schools here and they have support in this community. She said it was a beautiful thing to see local people offering homes to those in need.

Blumstein went on to say that there is also a resource center nearby where all the families can go to get social security cards, drivers licenses, phones, gift cards, and other essential things.

"And then the Red Cross is here, FEMA, so they have all the support you know but going forward it's going to be a day to day thing," she added.

Moreover, Blumstein noted that they even found masseuses that provide some 15-minute massages to the responders to give them some relief after lifting heavy weights.

Blumstein has been a Surfside resident for 20 years.

"That's what brings me here. I just felt when it happened," she shared why she came to work as a volunteer at the Surfside Community Center. "I just felt internally that I couldn't continue with my routine, that I have the ability as an at-home mom to have extra time and I felt that I needed to be involved in some capacity. So, that's how it all began. It has been such an amazing experience to see the outpouring of love, not only from our amazing Surfside community but from all over. I've been here every day."

She said some people are coming from other towns.

"I had a woman coming on a bus for 3 hours to drop off a teddy bear and a toy for a child because she knew how it felt to lose a loved one. And it's just a beautiful thing to be a part of," Blumstein added.

She noted that there are dozens of volunteers working 24/7 there trying to support those affected by the tragedy.

"There is an entire kitchen in the back, a kosher kitchen. We are feeding everybody - first responders, the family that comes, so it's a 24 hour operation.

When asked how the people affected are doing at the moment, she said, "as you can expect, it's devastating, it's a shock."

Blumstein shared that volunteering at the center helps her, keeping busy.

"I really haven't had much of a time to let it sink in. Little by little I feel like this is what I need to do now," she explained. "It's a shock. It's devastating to see those pictures on TV. I can't believe it's, but it's the reality and we just have to support the survivors,"

According to the latest figures, updated daily by Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava, the bodies of 20 people have so far been retrieved from under the rubble, with 128 people unaccounted for and 188 accounted for.

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#### US Senator Ted Cruz Blocking State Dept. Nominees Over Nord Stream 2 Pipeline – Reports

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) - Republican Senator Ted Cruz is blocking 13 of President Joe Biden's nominees to Department of State positions to force the US government to re-impose economic sanctions on the company building Russia's Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline to Europe, NBC News reported on Friday.

The 13 nominees, including two assistant secretaries, have all already been approved by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) but they are now in indefinite limbo as Cruz continues to hold up their confirmation processes to get the Biden administration to reverse its sanctions waiver, the report said.

Cruz is blocking Brett Holmgren, Biden's choice as assistant secretary for intelligence and Daniel Kritenbrink, who is to be assistant secretary for East Asia and Pacific affairs as well as the next assistant secretary for international narcotics and law enforcement, in addition to a number of ambassadors, NBC News said.

Other Senate opponents of the new pipeline have not joined Cruz in his blocking tactics, NBC News noted.

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#### Yellen, German Finance Minister Meet to Discuss Global Minimum Company Tax - US Treasury

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and German Finance Minister Olaf Scholz met Friday to discuss the proposed global minimum for company taxes, the Treasury Department said in a readout of the talks on Friday.

"Earlier today, Secretary of the Treasury Janet L. Yellen met with German Finance Minister Olaf Scholz to discuss the upcoming G20 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors meeting in Venice," the readout said. "The Secretary and the Minister discussed the historic agreement that the OECD Inclusive Framework reached on international taxation."

On Thursday, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) announced that 130 countries have agreed to a minimum worldwide corporate tax of 15 percent. OECD added that the proposal will be brought before the Group of 20 countries. The G20

Finance Ministers and the Central Bank Governors meeting is planned to be held in Venice on July 9 and 10.

OECD also said the agreement was expected to be finalized by October and implemented from 2023 onward.

The move toward a global minimum tax came after President Joe Biden demanded that large US companies pay their "fair share" and vowed to crack down on those that employed complicated maneuvers to reduce or eliminate their tax obligations by shifting income on paper between countries.

More than a thousand big, mostly US corporations - eBay, Google, Facebook, PayPal, Microsoft, Yahoo, AOL, Twitter, Intel, Pfizer, Boston Scientific and Johnson & Johnson - have their tax base in Ireland to take advantage of corporate taxes there that stand at 12.5 percent, compared with the US rate of 21 percent.

Some US companies also park their profits in tax havens to avoid paying any tax at all.

California-based Apple, for instance, has its tax base in the island of Jersey, which is located in the English Channel between England and France and does not pay corporate tax.

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**Iraq Leaders Pledge After Attacks to Protect US, Allied Bases - Operation Inherent Resolve**

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) - Iraqi government leaders have confirmed to Washington their determination to protect bases in their country housing US and Coalition forces against all attacks, Operation Inherent Resolve spokesperson Col. Wayne Marotto announced on Friday. "Iraq's leaders have reiterated to us their commitment to protecting ISF [Iraqi Security Forces] facilities hosting US and Coalition personnel," Marotto said via Twitter.

On June 27, US aircraft carried out strikes on facilities of Iranian-backed militias - Kata'ib Hezbollah and Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada - in the Iraq-Syria border region. White House



spokesperson Jan Psaki said on Monday the strikes were in response to five recent attacks against US personnel in Iraq.

"Each attack against the Gol [government of Iraq], KRI [Kurdistan Region of Iraq] and the Coalition undermines the authority of Iraqi institutions, the rule of law and Iraqi National sovereignty," Marotto said.

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US to Send 1.5Mln Doses of Moderna COVID-19 Vaccine to El Salvador - White House

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) - The United States will deliver 1.5 million doses of the Moderna coronavirus vaccine to El Salvador, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"This Sunday we will send 1.5 million doses of Moderna [vaccine] to El Salvador," Psaki told reporters.

The United States pledged to distribute 80 million doses of coronavirus vaccines around the world.

The Biden administration has already sent out millions of vaccines to Peru, Colombia, Brazil, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Ukraine and Pakistan.

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Ukraine Navy Crews Complete Training on Former US Vessels - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) - Ukrainian Navy crews have just finished training on two former US Coast Guard patrol boats in the United States that will be delivered to Kiev later this year as part of a program to build up Ukraine's naval power, the US State Department said on Friday.

"Ukrainian Navy crews recently completed training on two former US Coast Guard (USCG) patrol boats in Baltimore, Maryland, that will be delivered to Ukraine later this year," the State Department said in a blog.

The patrol boats are the third and fourth such vessels the United States has provided to Ukraine under the Excess Defense Articles program and the move demonstrates the US commitment to provide Ukraine with urgently needed equipment to replace those seized, held or destroyed by the Russian military, the State Department said.

"More than seven years into the conflict, Russia continues to hold multiple Ukrainian naval vessels, using unfounded allegations of cease-fire violations as a pretext," the State Department said.

In addition to the Island Class patrol boats, Ukraine is also receiving eight new armed Mark VI patrol boats, it added.

Since 2017, the State Department's Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation has provided over \$17 million in non-security assistance support to Ukraine's Maritime Border Guard Detachment, according to the State Department.

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**White House Says Still Expects US Forces Pullout From Afghanistan to Be Complete By August**

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration expects to complete the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan by the end of August, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"We currently expect it to be completed by the end of August," Psaki said when asked about reports the United States is ahead of schedule in the retrograde process.

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**Russian Mission to UN Calls Report on Instructors in CAR 'Forgery' - Statement**

UNITED NATIONS, July 2 (Sputnik) - The UN Panel of Experts report alleging serious human rights violations perpetrated by Russian instructors in the Central African Republic (CAR) is a politically motivated forgery and is baseless text based on biased sources, the Permanent Mission of Russia to the United Nations said in a statement on Friday.

"The segment of this report that touches upon the assistance provided by the Russian instructors cannot be characterized as anything other than a forgery," the statement said. "It is fully based on anonymous or biased sources, is baseless, provocative and politically motivated." The statement pointed out that while the report contains entirely anonymous sources of information, it legitimizes allegations by opposition media resources.

"The cited 'facts' and 'evidence' stand up to no criticism. All of them founder on the counterarguments and rebuttal that we presented, i.e. during the discussion of the document in the Sanctions Committee," the statement said.

The diplomatic mission noted that the Russian instructors' deployment in the CAR is based on bilateral agreements with that country in order to train its army and provide humanitarian support to its security forces.

"Those who directly have to do with high professionalism of the Russian instructors in the CAR, including the authorities, they give the opposite assessment to the activity of Russian trainers," the mission said.

Russia will firmly preclude any attempts to cast a shadow on its cooperations with the Africans and spread false information, it added.

The UN report, dated June 25, claimed that Russian military instructors, along with the Central African Armed Forces, are responsible for committing human rights abuses, including indiscriminate killings of civilians in the CAR and looting of humanitarian facilities.

According to the Russian Foreign Ministry, more than 500 Russian instructors are currently working in the CAR and new deployments have not yet been planned. The CAR presidential administration stressed that the presence of Russian instructors in the country had been authorized by the UN Security Council.

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**'Secret Satellite' Launched From ISS Turns Out to Be Japanese CubeSat – US Space Command**

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) – The US Space Command (USSPACECOM) has clarified recent reports of a “secret satellite” launched from the International Space Station (ISS) which actually was a Japanese CubeSat mistakenly registered by the space tracking service as an American object, USSPACECOM Director of Public Affairs, Lieutenant Colonel Erin Dick told Sputnik on Friday.

Sputnik reported on Thursday that the United States had secretly launched a satellite from its segment of the ISS, cataloged by the space-track.org service as BD-28 with an American country code. The fact puzzled many while some offered their explanations for this, including the American astronomer Jonathan McDowell who suggested on Twitter that the satellite could belong to a private US company that didn't want to attract attention to its activities.

“It turns out there was an error in what was posted on space-track.org, and it has since been updated,” Dick said. “BD-28, also referred to as G-Satellite 2, is a Japanese CubeSat. The country code for BD-28 will be updated to JPN.”

CubeSats are miniature satellites used for space research that weigh up to 3 pounds and have a cubical shape.

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**Trudeau to Convene Incident Response Group After BC Village Destroyed by Wildfire**

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) – Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Friday he will convene the Incident Response Group to discuss the raging wildfires in the province of British Columbia (BC) which destroyed an entire village over the week.

The heatwave in BC, which set a Canadian temperature record in the several days since its onset, has spurred wildfires that have left charred remains of the village of Lytton and forced a complete evacuation of its residents.



"We are standing with the people of Lytton," Trudeau said during a press briefing addressing the extreme weather crisis in BC. "Later today, I will be convening the Incident Response Group, with ministers from my team address the needs of communities hit in BC."

The Prime Minister did not specify the type of help the federal government is considering deploying to BC, but said that cabinet ministers, including Minister of National Defense Harjit Sajjan, are in touch with local authorities.

Some 1,000 residents have been evacuated, according to Mike Farnworth, the Minister of Public Safety of British Columbia.

The provincial wildfire service reported that the fire ravaging Lytton was classified as "out of control" and estimated to be 6,400 hectares (15,800 acres) in size. It continues to spread due to dry, windy and hot weather conditions.

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'It Reminded Me of 9/11' - Surfside Collapse Witness

SURFSIDE, Florida, July 2 (Sputnik) - Rainer Sandoval, a Venezuelan national, told Sputnik he has now witnessed two major tragedies that struck the United States, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, and the building collapse in Surfside, Florida on June 24, 2021.

Sandoval told Sputnik he lived in New York City for many years before moving to with his partner to Surfside, settling in a house within minutes of the now-collapsed building. "I open my house door and I can see the building," he noted.

"I was sleeping. Everything was silent, and then I heard something... The sound was, oh my gosh, it was incredible. I can't describe it," Sandoval said of the night of the tragedy. "I was living in New York when 9/11 happened, so it reminded me of 9/11 because it was horrible for me to live through. That experience was really, really bad because I saw the second plane crash into the second tower, and I saw the tower collapse. So, it was horrible, horrible, horrible. And when I saw this, you know, it reminded me of what I lived through in New York. It was horrible."

Sandoval noted that when he exited his hallway, he saw plenty of smoke and immediately rushed towards the building.

He noted that he first saw the left part of the building collapse, and several seconds later, the second part collapsed

"A lot of people were crying walking around the scene. You could also hear people screaming from the building," he said. "I heard a lot of people screaming, crying."

"I saw all that and I couldn't breathe because I also have sinus," he noted.

He went on to describe the panic that swept through the residents of the neighboring parts of the condo, fearing the rest of the structure could also come down.

"People were praying on the balconies because they saw everything. They thought they were going to die because they say that the building collapsed, and the other collapsed, and thought maybe this building is going to collapse too. So, a lot people were crying," Sandoval said.

He noted that firefighters came right away and put the ladders to get people down. "Many people were rescued, even old ones," he said.

Sandoval went on to say that the atmosphere became hysterical as many people were trying to help but couldn't.

"A lot of people who were walking around tried to help people, but how? They didn't have anything. Everybody was crying, Everybody was hysterical because it was impossible to help them," he said.

Sandoval went on to lament the flight of residents from the neighboring buildings but was understanding of the concerns of the residents.

"Nobody wants to be in such a situation. I prefer to have my relatives safe. It is so sad," he said.

"They think that something may happen and want to move out."

According to the latest figures, updated daily by Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava, the bodies of 20 people have so far been retrieved from under the rubble, with 128 people unaccounted for and 188 accounted for.

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#### US Drawdown From Afghanistan Will Not Be Anytime Soon - Biden

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) - The withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan will not happen anytime soon, President Joe Biden said on Friday, citing the possibility of American troops being there beyond September while expressing his concerns about the government in Kabul facing up to domestic issues.

"It's not going to be done in the next few days," Biden told reporters at the White House when asked about the planned US exit from Afghanistan. "No, we're on track, exactly as to where we expect it to be, but ... we wouldn't be able to do it all [by] September. There'll still be some forces left."

Pressed for details, Biden said the White House wanted to ensure there was enough "running room" to complete the US withdrawal in the next two months as planned.

Biden also said that the United States has "worked out an over-the-horizon capacity" to assist the Afghan government if air support is needed to keep Kabul out of the hands of the Taliban.

"The Afghans are going to have to be able to do it themselves with the air force they have, which we're helping them maintain," he said. "I think they have the capacity to be able to sustain the government but they're going to have to be down the road (for) more negotiations, I suspect. But I am concerned that they deal with the internal issues that they have, to be able to generate the kind of support they need nationwide to maintain the government."

Biden's comments came after the top US general in Afghanistan warned earlier this week that the country was at serious risk of sliding into a civil war, citing the rapid loss of district centers each day to Taliban fighters.

The US president emphasized that there was no retreat in the plan for a complete withdrawal from Afghanistan at some point, adding the United States has been engaged in the war there for 20 years.

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#### **Pentagon Starting Immediate Military Law Reform on Sexual Offenses - Defense Secretary**

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) - The Defense Department will immediately launch several reforms to radically revise and strengthen the legal processes to prosecute all sexual crimes committed within and by members of the US military, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin announced on Friday.

"There are several reforms on which I direct the [Defense] Department to start moving forward now," Austin said in a memorandum for senior military leaders and combatant command chiefs. "It is clear that ... countering sexual assault and sexual harassment in our military will require a comprehensive approach."

Austin announced the creation of dedicated offices within the secretariat of each military department to handle the prosecution of all such crimes within the US armed forces.

"We will work with Congress to amend the UCMJ [Uniform Code of Military Justice] by removing the prosecution of sexual assaults and related crimes, domestic violence, child abuse and retaliation from the military chain of command," Austin said.

Sexual harassment was also now added as an offense under the Uniform Code of Military Justice, Austin added.

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#### **Biden Says US Economy 'On the Move' After New Jobs Data Revealed for June**

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) - The US economy is improving and the coronavirus is "on the run," President Joe Biden said on Friday after data showed at least 100,000 jobs above forecast levels were added in the month of June.

"Put simply, our economy is on the move and we have COVID-19 on the run," Biden told reporters at the White House, after the Labor Department reported that employers added 850,000 jobs in June against the 720,000 additions forecast on the average.

Fifteen months into the pandemic, restoring jobs growth remains one of the key goals of US policy makers.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April 2020, at the height of lockdowns and at least 7 million of them have yet to return, according to officials. Despite the outsize job additions for June, revision's to last month's number meant that the unemployment rate remained virtually unchanged at 5.9 percent.

The economy itself shrank 3.5 percent in 2020, although first quarter data for 2021 showed a dynamic rebound of 6.4 percent.



The Federal Reserve has forecast a 6.5 percent economic growth for all of 2021 although Jerome Powell, chairman of the central bank, says he does not expect "full employment" - defined by a monthly unemployment rate of 4 percent or lower - to occur anytime soon.

Biden glossed over some of those worries by pointing at the 3 million jobs or so created by his administration since January, the most by any in the first five months of a presidency.

"Our recovery is helping us flip the script. Instead of workers competing with each other for jobs that are scarce, employers are competing with each other to attract workers," he said. "That kind of competition in the market doesn't just give workers more ability to earn higher wages. It also gives them the power to demand to be treated with dignity and respect in the workplace. More jobs, better wages: that's a good combination."

Biden noted that the United States is the only major advanced economy for which the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development had projected higher economic growth for 2021 versus the previous year.

The Congressional Budget Office has also doubled its initial growth projection of 3.7 percent for 2021 to 7.4 percent Biden added.

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**US Sanctions 7 'Key' Members of Myanmar Military, 15 Family Members – Treasury**

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on 22 individuals in Myanmar, including seven key military officials, the US Treasury Department said in a release on Friday.

"The US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated 22 individuals connected to Burma's military regime," the release said. "Among the individuals sanctioned today are seven key members of Burma's military, which continues to repress the pro-democracy movement in the country and use lethal force against the people of Burma, including children and members of ethnic minority groups.

The Treasury Department said the other 15 individuals are the spouses or adult children of previously designated senior Myanmar military officials whose financial networks have contributed to their "ill-gotten gains."

The list of Myanmar officials sanctioned by the US includes four military-appointed members of the cabinet as well as three members of the State Administrative Council created by the military following the coup on February 2, the release said.

Besides individuals and members of the military government, the US Department of Commerce added four entities from Myanmar to its sanctions list due to their alleged support to the military regime – telecommunications company King Royal Technologies and Wanbao Mining along with two of its subsidiaries, the release added.

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## US Supreme Court Denies Relief to Alabama Death Row Prisoner Matthew Reeves

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court on Friday ruled to reverse a Court of Appeals decision that granted relief to Alabama death-row prisoner Matthew Reeves for not being adequately represented by his lawyers.

Reeves was convicted of murdering a man who helped him tow his broken-down car and sentenced to death based on the aggravating nature of the crime that included shooting the victim in the back of the head and then inventing a dance that replicated the victim's dying movements.

Reeves argued his counsel ineffectively defended him by failing to provide evidence that he is intellectually disabled and can not be legally executed. Much of the arguments in the case centered on intelligence tests proving Reeves' intellectual disability and the fact his lawyers did not acquire expert opinion to show their client's disability.

The Supreme Court said the legal question at hand was whether the lower court in Alabama violated US federal law when it rejected Reeves' claim that his attorneys should have hired an expert.

"We think it clear from context that the Alabama court did not apply a blanket rule, but rather determined that the facts of this case did not merit relief... For the foregoing reasons, we grant the petition for a writ of certiorari, reverse the judgment of the Court of Appeals, and remand the case for proceedings consistent with this opinion," the Supreme Court said.

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## Death Toll in Florida Building Collapse Rises to 20 With 128 People Still Missing - Mayor

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) - Two additional bodies were recovered from the Surfside condo building collapse, bringing the death count to 20, Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava said on Friday.

"Last night we did discover two additional victims... we have now confirmed 20 deaths," Cava told reporters. "188 people are accounted for and 128 are unaccounted for."

Moreover, Cava said they are monitoring Hurricane Elsa and the area could be hit with tropical storm winds as early as Sunday.

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## US Defense Official Discusses Russia, China With Lithuania Minister – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) – The Department of Defense's top policymaking official held a conversation to discuss Russia, China and other issues with Lithuania's vice minister of national defense, Pentagon Deputy Press Secretary Jamal Brown said on Friday.

"Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Dr. Colin Kahl spoke today with Lithuanian Vice Minister of National Defense Margiris Abukevicius," Brown said in a readout. "They discussed a wide range of issues including Russia, China and bilateral defense cooperation."

Kahl and Abukevicius reaffirmed the strength and importance of the bilateral relationship between the United States and Lithuania, the readout said.

"The Under Secretary thanked Lithuania for its sustained focus on defense spending and for its support to NATO and other multinational missions," Brown said.

Lithuania is granting asylum to Afghan interpreters who worked for its military in Afghanistan amid concerns for their safety after NATO's withdrawal, Lithuania's Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis said in June.

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**Biden Says Not Worried Delta Variant Will Cause New Outbreak in US, But Lives Will Be Lost**

UNITED NATIONS, July 2 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Friday he was not concerned that the delta variant of the novel coronavirus has the potential to spark a new major epidemic in the United States, but was worried lives will be lost among those refusing to get vaccinated.

"I am concerned that people who have not gotten vaccinated have the capacity to catch the variant and spread the variant to other people who have not been vaccinated," Biden said. "I am not concerned there's going to be a major outbreak, that we're going to have another epidemic nationwide, but I am concerned lives will be lost."

Biden urged Americans who have not been inoculated against the coronavirus to not think only of themselves and receive vaccinations without delay.

On Thursday, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky said the delta variant is predicted to become the predominant variant in the coming weeks in the United States, mainly affecting regions with low vaccination rates.

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**Boeing 737 Cargo Plane Goes Down in Waters Off Honolulu, 2 Pilots Rescued - FAA to Sputnik**

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) - A cargo version of Boeing 737 aircraft was forced to land in the waters near Honolulu, Hawaii, due to an engine problem that occurred right after take-off, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) told Sputnik on Friday.

The FAA said the pilots attempted to return to the airport of departure in Honolulu, but had to undertake emergency landing on water. The Coast Guard rescued both pilots, the FAA added. The incident with the cargo airplane occurred overnight at around 1:30 a.m. local time (11:30 GMT), according to the FAA.

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**Biden Says US Drawdown From Afghanistan Will Not End Soon, Forces to Remain Beyond Sept**

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) - The withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan will not be anytime soon, President Joe Biden said Friday, adding that he expected that some American troops would remain on the ground there beyond the targeted month of September.

"It's not going to be done in the next few days," Biden told reporters at the White House when asked about the planned exit from Afghanistan. "No, We're on track, exactly as to where we expect it to be, but ... we wouldn't be able to do it all (by) September. There'll still be some forces left."

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**US Olympic Team Member Suspended Over Marijuana Use - Anti-Doping Agency**

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) - The United States Anti-Doping Agency announced on Friday that it had suspended for one month US Olympic Team athlete Sha'Carri Richardson for using marijuana ahead of the Tokyo Olympic Games later this month.

"Sha'Carri Richardson, of Clermont, Fla., an athlete in the sport of track and field, has accepted a one-month suspension - as permitted under the applicable international rules - for an anti-doping rule violation for testing positive for a substance of abuse," the agency said in a release. "Richardson, 21, tested positive for 11-nor-9-carboxy-tetrahydrocannabinol (Carboxy-THC), a urinary metabolite of Delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the main psychoactive constituent of cannabis, marijuana, and hashish."

The suspension period was reduced from three to one month because Richardson successfully completed a counseling program on cannabis use as well as because she used marijuana unrelated to her sport performance, the release said.

All competitive results of the athlete obtained during the competitions on June 19, including the team trials for the Olympics, have been disqualified while Richardson also had to forfeit any medals, points and prizes, the release added.

Richardson was supposed to participate in 100 meter race at the Tokyo Olympics after she won the race during the US Olympics trials, according to the release.

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#### US Removes 3 Iranians From Sanctions Blacklist - Treasury

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) - The US has taken three Iranian nationals off of the Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons (SDN) list, the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) said on Friday.

The three individuals removed from the sanctions list are Behzad Daniel Ferdows, Mehrzad Manuel Ferdows, and Mohammed Reza Dezfulian, who were initially placed on the list as non-proliferation designations.

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#### US Sanctions 7 'Key' Members of Myanmar Military, 15 Family Members - Treasury

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on 22 individuals in Myanmar, including seven key military officials, the US Treasury Department said in a release on Friday.

"The US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated 22 individuals connected to Burma's military regime," the release said. "Among the individuals sanctioned today are seven key members of Burma's military, which continues to repress the pro-democracy movement in the country and use lethal force against the people of Burma, including children and members of ethnic minority groups.

The Treasury Department said the other 15 individuals are the spouses or adult children of previously designated senior Myanmar military officials whose financial networks have contributed to their "ill-gotten gains."

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#### US Adds 850,000 Jobs in June, Unemployment Rate Little Changed at 5.9% - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) - US employers added 850,000 jobs in June, the Labor Department announced on Friday, beating forecasts by more than 100,000, but the unemployment rate was virtually unchanged as jobs recovery remained a stiff challenge more than a year into the coronavirus pandemic.

"Total nonfarm payroll employment rose by 850,000 in June, and the unemployment rate was little changed at 5.9 percent," the Bureau of Labor Statistics, a unit within the Labor Department, said in a statement. In May, there were 559,000 job additions, while the unemployment rate was at 5.8%.

Economists polled by US media had forecast an average jobs growth of 720,000 for June.

"The nonfarm payroll number was obviously stronger than expectations," economist Greg Michalowski said in a comment posted on ForexLive, while noting that the "unemployment rate is higher." Overall, it was "some good and not so good," he added.

Although 15 months have passed since the first US outbreak of the COVID-19, and the economy has rebounded strongly since, restoring job growth remains one of the biggest challenges of US policymakers.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April 2020, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus. At least 7 million of those jobs have yet to return, officials say.

The economy itself shrank 3.5% in 2020, although first-quarter data for 2021 showed a dynamic rebound of 6.4%.

The Federal Reserve has forecast a 6.5% economic growth for all of 2021 although Jerome Powell, chairman of the central bank, says he does not expect "full employment" — defined by a monthly unemployment rate of 4.0% or lower — to occur anytime soon.

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**Trudeau Receives Moderna Vaccine for Second Shot After Initial One With AstraZeneca**

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Friday received his second dose of the coronavirus vaccine at an Ottawa pharmacy, opting for the Moderna vaccine after receiving the AstraZeneca shot for his first round.

The Prime Minister and his spouse, who contracted the novel coronavirus last March, received their first vaccine dose on April 23.

Trudeau appeared to be in good spirits as he received the second inoculation in a mixed-dose schedule. Canada's National Advisory Committee on Immunizations (NACI) recommended last month that those who received the Oxford-AstraZeneca coronavirus shot as the first dose in their vaccination schedule should get vaccinated with a messenger RNA (mRNA) vaccine for their second dose.

There are two mRNA vaccines currently approved for use in Canada, the ones produced by Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna.

Trudeau had made a show of getting vaccinated with the UK drugmaker's vaccine amid safety fears after a potential link between the AstraZeneca shot and possibly deadly blood clots - vaccine-induced thrombotic thrombocytopenia (VITT) - was discovered.

However, after the link was established and dozens of VITT cases, including six deaths, were reported to Canadian health officials, NACI made its recommendation and AstraZeneca's use in provinces' vaccine rollout plans has largely been curtailed.

The mixed-dose schedule has been met with scepticism by some experts and members of the public, however, NACI says the mixed-dose schedule provides better protection against the disease and reduces the risk of developing VITT.

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**Boeing 737 Cargo Plane Goes Down in Waters Off Honolulu, 2 Pilots Rescued - FAA to Sputnik**

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) – A cargo version of 737 Boeing cargo aircraft was forced to go down in the waters near Honolulu, Hawaii after an engine problem occurred after take-off, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) reported on Friday.

The pilots attempted to return to the airport of departure in Honolulu but had to conduct an emergency landing in the water, according to the agency. Local Coast Guard rescued both pilots, it added.

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**US International Trade Deficit Up 3.1% to \$71.2Bln in May - Commerce Dept.**

WASHINGTON, July 2 (Sputnik) - The US international trade deficit rose by 3.1% from a month earlier to reach \$71.2 billion in May, the Commerce Department's Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) said on Friday.

"The goods and services deficit was \$71.2 billion in May," the BEA said in a statement. In April, the deficit was \$69.1 billion.

The BEA said exports in May were at \$206 billion, some \$1.3 billion higher than in April, but that imports grew even more, by \$3.4 billion, to \$277.3 billion.

This rounds up the trade deficit to \$2.2 billion, the BEA said.

Among international trading partners, the United States' largest deficit was with China, at \$27.2 billion. On a monthly level though, the deficit with China shrank by \$5.1 billion from April.

The European Union region accounted for the second largest US trade deficit in May, at \$18.5 billion, while Canada came in third, at \$4.8 billion.